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Pete Carroll shows his
softer side, but that
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"Let's not just win one
Super Bowl."



insider SPOTLIGHT | JOHN CAVALIERE

Welcome to John's Barber Shop in Plainville, Conn., where no fan is denied a good cut. "You can stick a fork in my Yanks, and the Sox fans have let me hear it," says Cavaliere, who turns 74 on Sept. 3. "But I don't let my clippers slip." His career began in 1967 under his father; the collection took off in '80, when he bought his own shop. Cavaliere's prized piece is a poster chronicling all 56 hits of Joe DiMaggio's streak. "My first hero," he says. We offered a free year of Insider, but Cavaliere doesn't own a computer. He said he's tired of reading about A-Rod anyway. ARE YOU A SUPER-INSIDER? Tweet a pic to @ESPNMag and you might wind up here.

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If only Megatron's fantasy points were worth real wins last season. But hey, Detroit, the cover was still cool. espnmag.com/covers

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"If you want to finish your degree online, you have to find time to get it done. Plain and simple. It's been a struggle at times, but it's something that's important to me. So I always make time for something that's important."



Work Hard

"I have a very intense job. It requires me to go out there and play at a high level against some of the greatest competition in the world. So I have to put the time in every single day. When I'm on that field, I'm totally honed in, I'm focused."

Photos courtesy David Register

Let's get to work

with
Larry Fitzgerald
Arizona Wide Receiver

When fans evaluate pro football players, they usually talk about numbers like total yards and wins and losses. Grade-point average isn't usually a factor. But veteran wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald doesn't see it that way. He views his football career as just one phase of his life and has pursued a degree from University of Phoenix for the next. For Fitzgerald, preparing for his future is just as important as preparing for Sunday's game.

While Fitzgerald will always be known as a football player, he sees parallels between his on-field career and off-field aspirations.

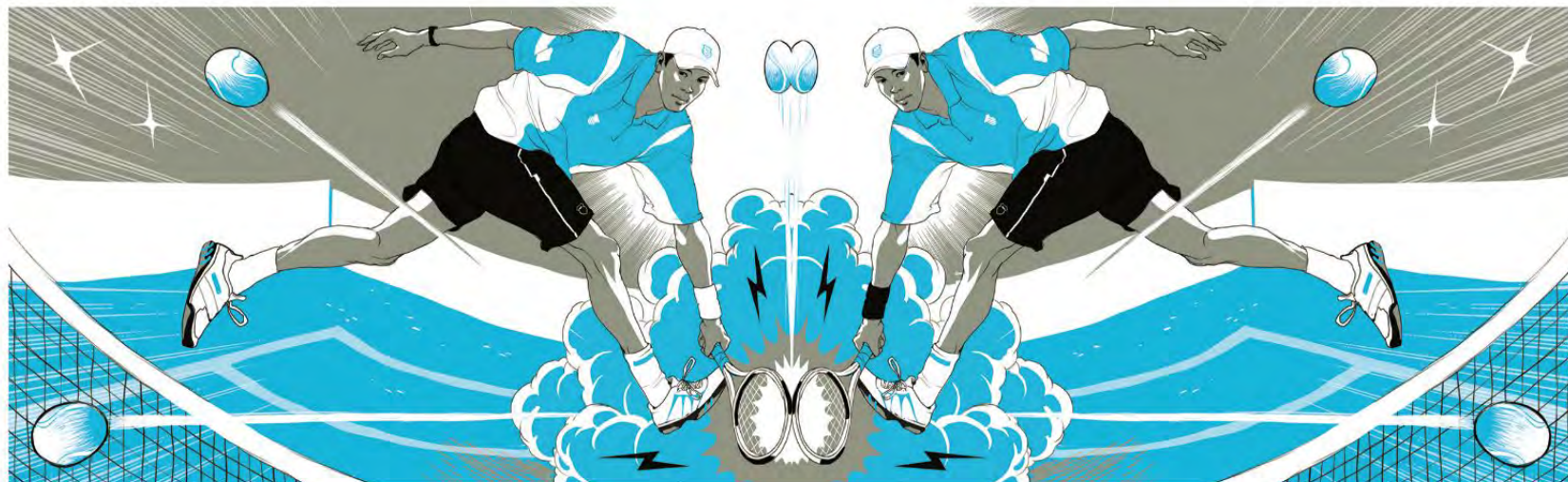
"I want to do something with my degree as I move on to my post-career," Fitzgerald said. "I would love to be in the journalism field and do some broadcasting. My degree is going to help me with those endeavors."

“*The doors that possibly would have been closed if I didn't have my degree are now going to be open, and that's the thing that's most exciting for me.*”

When Fitzgerald was younger, his mom battled cancer. He made a promise to her that no matter what, he would focus on his education.

"Her main goal for me was to graduate from college," Fitzgerald said. "She felt that education was something that nobody could ever take from you."

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[TWO FOR THE SHOW] *As they reach for history at the U.S. Open, the Bryan twins will make you forget all about the sorry state of American men's tennis.*

[I] f you pay close attention, you can hear a coughing sound interrupting the endless stream of lament regarding the state of U.S. men's tennis. It's coming from the back of the room from twins Bob and Mike Bryan, the doubles machine that never quite finds itself in the conversation of everything that's right with the American game, even though only Patton and MacArthur were more decorated than these two.

True, the nadir of American men's tennis is nigh. True, Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras aren't walking through that door any time soon, except to play legends exhibitions. For the first time since the inception of the ATP rankings in 1973, no Americans are to be found in the singles Top 20, and no one—not John Isner, not Ryan Harrison, not Sam Querrey—is quite good enough to tussle consistently on the big stage for the big hardware with Messrs. Djokovic, Nadal and Murray. The future of men's tennis in this country is a pubescent group of seventh-graders at malls across America, stepping out of their minivans, about to go back-to-school shopping with Mom.

The present of doubles, however, is the Bryans, otherwise known as the greatest men's doubles team in the history of the game. They are better than Woodbridge and Woodforde, better than McEnroe and Fleming. If Venus and Serena Williams are the greatest pair of siblings that American athletics has ever produced, the Bryan brothers are second, with apologies to the Mannings.

Bob and Mike are tennis gifts from the gods, monozygotic miracles born 35 years ago to physical advantage and talented and dedicated enough to transform advantage into legend. Bob is 6'4", Mike an inch shorter. Bob is lefthanded, making them the rarest of genetic miracles, the mirror twins, perfect for doubles. They've won each of the four majors at least twice and have 15 slam titles total, two more than the Williams sisters. And unlike the Williams sisters, the Bryans enter the U.S. Open just a championship away from winning the calendar grand slam. That hasn't been done on the men's side since 1951, since

before Bobby Thomson hit the shot heard 'round the world. The brothers already hold all four majors after having won last year's U.S. Open, and they carry the Olympic gold medal on top of that. So winning the Open would give them what no male player has ever had: the calendar grand slam plus the most recent gold medal. (In 1988 Steffi Graf became the only female to pull off that feat.)

The résumé is one thing, but watching them is another. Lamenting where John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors have gone is a mistake without enjoying these two play the game. They turn doubles into extreme pinball, with hand-eye coordination so dizzying that all it can do for spectators is produce wonder and smiles and ultimately applause because *it just isn't possible to be that quick*. Even among the elite in tennis, the Bryans are different, affecting doubles with aggression, one positioned almost on top of the other, convinced they are quicker, sharper and better than anyone across the net. They're so good they are simultaneously taken for granted and oddly nitpicked because their success is not in singles but in the less viewed doubles and because their top potential challengers—such as Max Mirnyi and Daniel Nestor—aren't together. These criticisms are weak. The scoreboard never lies.

There was a time not so terribly long ago when doubles was broadcast prominently on TV and was also taken seriously by the best singles players (McEnroe and Martina Navratilova, for example). Those days are long gone. Tennis is about the grand slams, and few name players would jeopardize winning a singles title for doubles glory. The price has been less visibility for the staggering achievements of the Bryans.

But hopefully this year's U.S. Open will change that. They need one last title for history, and it is sitting for the taking at Flushing Meadows. For all the consternation about American tennis, two brothers have been rewriting the doubles record books and may do so again.

For one fortnight, finding the next McEnroe can wait. ■

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[WHO'S CHEATING WHO?] *Even as the alleged Biogenesis clients were suspended, we still know very little about how PEDs impact performance. Time for MLB to step up to the plate.*

[S]ince MLB dropped the hammer on 13 alleged Biogenesis clients on Aug. 5, I've read that Alex Rodriguez's entire career was a hoax. I've heard talk-radio hosts claim that a clean player could have added 100 home runs and 400 RBIs to his career totals by using steroids during the 1990s. I've seen major leaguers blame other major leaguers for beating them out of jobs by juicing. And I always have the same question: How do you know?

Fifteen years after Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa, after BALCO and Barry Bonds, after Biogenesis and Ryan Braun, the baseball world has essentially zero understanding of how much performance-enhancing drugs actually enhance performance. So I say: Release the data! Our appreciation of baseball's athletes and our assessment of all-time greats are rooted in their numbers. That's why MLB should offer a reduced suspension, immunity if necessary, to any player who fully discloses which PEDs he has taken and when. And then let the regression analyses fly. Compiling and comparing athletes' real-life drug use and results is the only way we will ever figure out how to interpret stats on steroids.

Back in 1998, after reporter Steve Wilstein revealed that McGwire was using androstenedione, Bud Selig and the MLBPA agreed to have two doctors from Harvard study the steroid. But at baseball's winter meetings that year, the researchers briefed team doctors and trainers on their limited findings—that low doses of andro increase testosterone—and were never heard from again. Since then, several papers have examined the effects of PEDs on body mass, endurance and healing time. But I have found just one that connects anabolics to on-field changes in MLB performance: In a study published in the *Journal of Quantitative Analysis in Sports* in 2010, Vittorio Addona and Jeremy Roth, a mathematics professor and student at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., looked at all pitchers suspended for flunking a drug test since 2005 or named in the Mitchell report. Despite the sample's flaws, Addona and Roth found that steroids use increased average fastball velocity by

1.07 mph. Interesting—but just the first droplets of data we need to clean away the effects of doping from MLB stats.

Amid our current ignorance, even seemingly obvious claims about PEDs are hard to prove. For instance, A-Rod averaged 36.8 home runs a year for the Mariners from 1996 to 2000, then a whopping 52 per season from 2001 to 2003, when he played for the Rangers and has admitted using steroids. Clearly the juice gave him a big boost, right? Except that in moving from Seattle to Arlington, Rodriguez shifted from a strong stadium for pitchers to a great hitters' park, which accounts for most of the increase in his production. Consider that if you double A-Rod's road stats from 2000, his last season with the Mariners, you get a .356 average, 56 HRs and 162 RBIs—a greater season than he ever had in Texas (or New York).

So what gives? Didn't the steroids work? Did they help simply by keeping him healthy? Was he juicing even before he left Seattle? We don't know, so we tend to judge A-Rod's numbers by how we feel about him. But players deserve statistical as much as legal due process.

While it's usually hard for researchers to test illegal drugs in potentially dangerous doses on human beings, the Biogenesis crew has essentially just conducted years of clinical experiments on itself. Anthony Bosch's records are a road map to what happened between the "before" and "after" phases of players such as Braun and Nelson Cruz. Publish that kind of data and maybe, just maybe, we'll start to untangle how different kinds of drugs and doping patterns affect various statistics.

Then fans and sports writers would have better frames of reference to judge the players of today and the recent past. Selig could move beyond cracking down on the offenders who have embarrassed MLB and serve history. And any player who stepped forward to disclose his clinical records could actually do some good in a story that has had very few heroes. ■

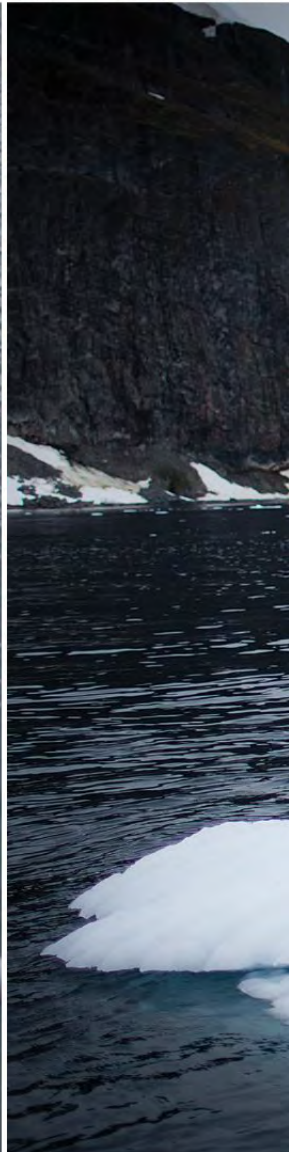


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ZOOM



WHO

Cardinals receiver Larry Fitzgerald

WHAT

Vacation with teammate and fellow wideout Andre Roberts

WHEN

Feb. 7-12

WHERE

Antarctica

"I'd been on every continent but Antarctica. I thought it'd be all ice, but it's a desert with glaciers and wildlife. One day we walked among 20,000 penguins. Some ran right through our legs. I used my 400 mm lens on them and got some great shots. Andre and I even jumped into 35-degree water. If I said I stayed in there for 15 seconds, I'd be lying." —**LARRY FITZGERALD**, as told to Anna Katherine Clemmons

Photographs, clockwise from bottom right, by **ALEJANDRO KIRCHUK** [3] and **LARRY FITZGERALD** [2]

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Goalposts do not grow on trees. These sentinels of the gridiron are metallurgical, technological marvels made by companies like Sportsfield Specialties. Here, at its plant in Delhi, N.Y., a worker sprays aluminum poles with a powder coating [DuPont aero yellow] before the paint is oven baked at 400 degrees for 15 minutes. "It takes 15 people about 17 hours to make one post," says Eric Hulbert, the chief of operations. "Ten years ago, it took 25 hours." More than 3,000 sets of Sportsfield goalposts are now scattered across the land in NFL, college and high school stadiums. Hulbert, a former linebacker at nearby Walton High, takes pride in his company's role: "Every time we see our goalposts on TV, we get a huge kick out of it." —**STEVE WULF**

Photograph by
FLOTO + WARNER

500

The number of goalpost pairs Sportsfield makes per year.

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The price tag for a set. To foil rabid faithful who want to tear them down, the company also makes goalposts with a rotating hinge for \$13,000 a set.



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TOP RIGHT: CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

ZOOM

WHO

Austin Dean, outfielder,
Batavia Muckdogs (Class-A)

WHAT

Riding out a rain delay

WHEN

Aug. 8, 7:51 p.m. ET

WHERE

Dwyer Stadium, Batavia, N.Y.

"It started to pour in the second inning of our game against the Hudson Valley Renegades. The dugout flooded quickly because the drain got clogged. The dugout trash can floated by, so I grabbed it, turned it on its side, jumped on and started paddling with a bat. I put a towel on my head and acted like I was just casually paddling down a river, singing Bob Marley's 'Three Little Birds'—*every little thing gonna be all right*. My teammates thought it was pretty funny. The water eventually rose three feet, maybe more, so we made a bridge out of chairs. I got off the trash can, climbed onto the bridge and went back to the clubhouse. It was nice and dry."

—**AUSTIN DEAN**, as told to
Anna Katherine Clemmons

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MIKE JANES/FOUR SEAM IMAGES





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PLAYBOOK



Pitching coach Jim Hickey likes to give space to young stars like ROY candidate Chris Archer. "What separates Hick," Archer says, "is his patience."

MLB

THE HOSS WHISPERER

THIS SUMMER, LIKE EVERY SUMMER, THE RAYS PITCHING STAFF HAS OWNED OPPOSING HITTERS. THE MAN BEHIND THAT DOMINATION? A FORMER SUBSTITUTE TEACHER KNOWN SIMPLY AS "HICK." *By Eddie Matz*

Chris Archer had spent July making grown men look like Little Leaguers, but now, against the Giants on the first Friday in August, the Rays' rookie phenom looks like, well, any other rookie. The trouble begins in the seventh, when Archer allows a cheapie infield single to Hunter Pence that travels all of 70 feet. Four pitches later, Brandon Belt lashes an RBI triple to deep center. On the very next pitch, Brandon Crawford crushes a two-run homer to right. Just like that, it's 4-1 Giants. It's the kind of blitzkrieg that typically results in a mound visit, especially with a rookie toeing the rubber. Heck, most pitching coaches would've trotted out there earlier. But Jim Hickey is not your typical pitching coach. Following the triple, he stays put in the dugout. After the home run, he doesn't move. Only when Archer gives up an infield single to Joaquin Arias, the fourth straight two-out hit, does Hickey make his way to the mound. The visit lasts 11 seconds, ends with a pat on the butt and is followed soon after by Archer's strikeout of Marco Scutaro to end the inning.

By now, the secret to Tampa Bay's small-market success is no secret at all: The Rays can pitch. Despite a

payroll that annually ranks among the league's lowest, the team's .568 winning percentage since the beginning of 2008 is second only to the Yankees' .581 (through Aug. 8). Not coincidentally, in four of the past five seasons, the Rays finished first or second in the American League in ERA. This season the team won 21 of 26 July games and overtook Boston for first place in the always difficult American League East, thanks to a staff that posted a scintillating 2.54 ERA (more than half a run better than the next closest AL team) and got seven complete games (most in one month since the '99 Phillies) from a baby-faced homegrown rotation that will earn a combined \$15.5 million this year, or almost \$8 million less than the Yanks' CC Sabathia. Make no mistake: With a middling offense that ranks sixth in the AL in runs scored and a slumping slugger—Evan Longoria's .635 OPS in July was the lowest of any month in his career—it's the Rays arms shouldering the load. The man behind the mound men? Hickey, the unheralded, less-is-more coach who knows that by letting his young hurlers lose a battle, like Archer lost that Friday in August, he's helping the Rays win the war.

Ask Tampa's hurlers what makes Hickey so good at his job and you'll hear the same words over and over again. *Communication. Trust. Patience.* It's as if they're reading from a script for a neighborhood bank commercial. "Honestly," says David Price, the 2012 Cy Young winner, "what's special about



Hickey's staff posted a 2.54 ERA in July, half a run better than the next AL club, and his lessons help relievers like Joel Peralta, whose 66 holds since 2012 [through Aug. 8] were tops in MLB.

Hick is his ability to communicate." That's right: On a club run by three former Wall Street analysts—owner Stuart Sternberg, GM Andrew Friedman and president Matthew Silverman—and renowned for its innovative, statistically minded analysis, Tampa's secret sauce is a pitcher who barely made it past Double-A who's really good at ... human interaction.

Knowing how (and when) to talk to people might not matter on a club that's laden with veteran pitchers. But in a market like Tampa, where the Rays rely on promoting affordable young talent in order to keep pace in the AL East arms race, it's an indispensable gift. "At this level, it's all mental," says 25-year-old starter Alex

Cobb, now in his third season with the Rays. "Hick just has a way of settling you down when things get sticky."

"There are three kinds of pitching coaches," says 1988 NL Cy Young winner and current ESPN analyst Orel Hershiser, who served as the Rangers pitching coach from 2002 through 2005. "The least-common-denominator coach tells you what you're doing wrong. The second-level coach tells you what you need to do differently but only addresses the symptom. Then there's the master, who watches you and understands you and gives you one tweak that fixes five things."

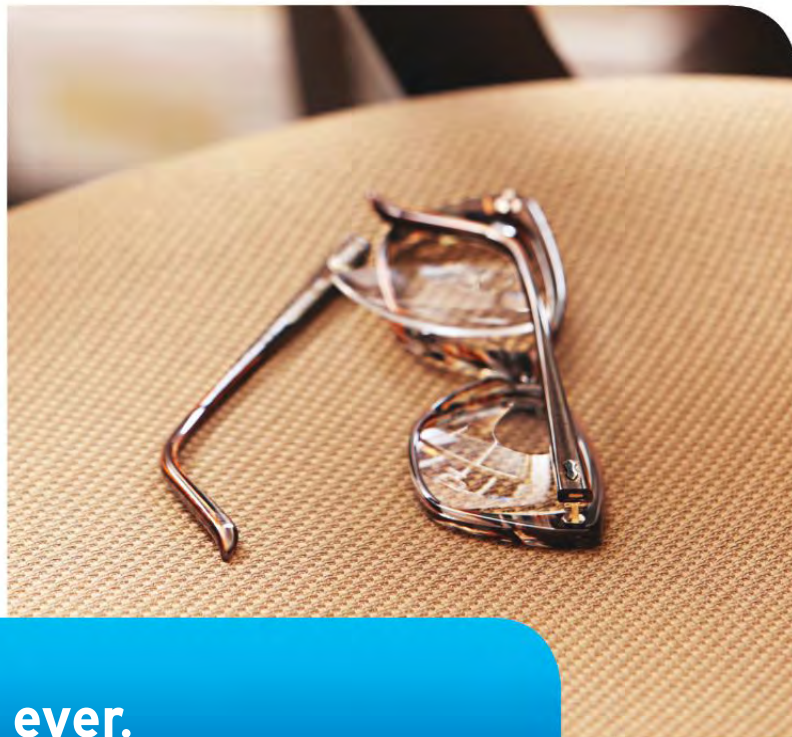
Which class is Hickey? Well, take the first time he laid eyes on Archer, in February

2011. Hickey saw a kid who delivered 98 mph cheese and a filthy slider. He also saw someone whose relatively short stride made for an inconsistent release point. Even though Hickey knew he wanted Archer to lengthen his stride, he held his tongue. He held his tongue through Archer's stop at Double-A Montgomery and Triple-A Durham. He held his tongue when Archer appeared at spring training. He even held his tongue after Archer's call-up in June, watching the kid labor through his first four 2013 starts, when he walked 14 hitters in 19⅓ innings, making it past the fifth inning only once and losing three of four games. At last, Hickey intervened.

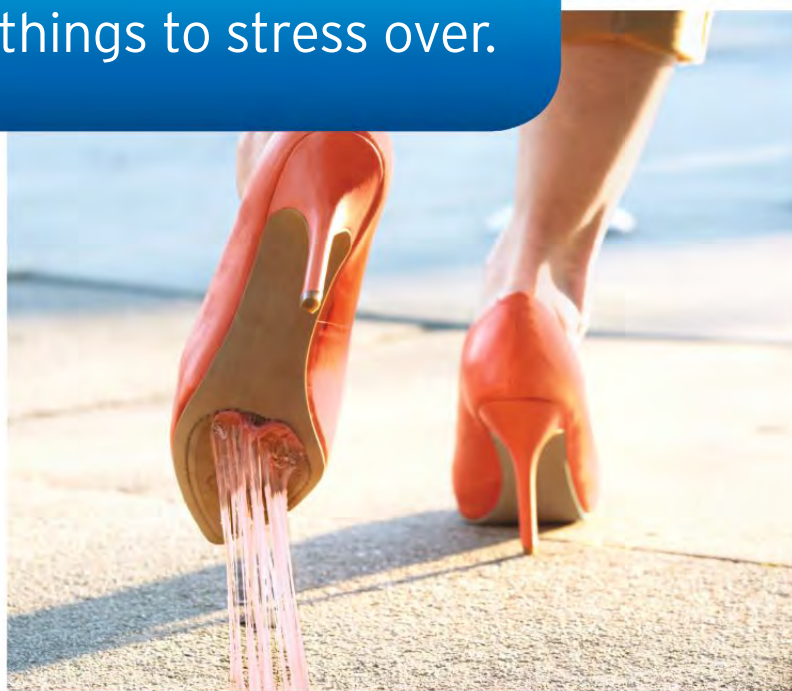
"Do you wanna be the four-inning, 100-pitch guy," the coach asked his right-hander during batting practice at Yankee Stadium, "or do you wanna be the dominant elite guy?" Moments later, Archer stood

20

Hickey preaches the virtues of off-speed stuff, and the Rays, in turn, threw changeups 20% of the time through Aug. 8, according to FanGraphs—25.8% more than the next closest club.



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atop the bullpen mound in the Bronx with Hickey by his side, the two of them working on adding an extra two or three inches to the starter's stride. "It was a minor thing," says Hickey, whose rule of thumb is to give his pitchers six starts before offering any kind of adjustments, "but I thought it would help Archie out." Three days after the intervention, Archer beat the Yankees, and he went undefeated in his next seven outings, in which he threw two shutouts, averaged nearly seven innings per start and walked a grand total of 11 batters.

"That," Hershiser says upon hearing the story, "is master-class coaching."

The ability to get through to his team is hardly surprising given Hickey's upbringing. Growing up on Chicago's South Side, James J. Hickey IV learned early how to relate to people. He was the fourth of six children. His mother was a special-needs teacher. His father was a Korean War vet and former prizefighter (he once battled Joe Louis) who could sell anything and did, driving door-to-door all over the Midwest convincing folks that they really and truly

needed all-natural sausage casing made of pig intestines.

A Cubs fan by birth, Hickey told his parents at 5 that he would be a major league baseball player. At Texas-Pan American, he threw 16 complete games his senior season. The success didn't translate to the pros, though. "I was an average minor league pitcher at best," says the 1983 13th-round draft pick. In 1989, after seven years toiling in the depths of the White Sox, Dodgers and Astros farm systems, Hickey decided it was time to swap cleats for commissions and follow his old man into the sales world. "I never had any intention of coaching," he says. Then Fred Gladding, the former big league hurler who'd been Hickey's pitching coach at Double-A Columbus, told Hickey he had the smarts and, more important, people skills to excel at it.

In 1991 Hickey got his first job as a pitching coach, working for the Astros' Class-A affiliate in Burlington, Iowa. Combining the listening skills of a salesman and the patience of a teacher, he was a natural. Nevertheless, 13 years later, he was still stuck in the minors, still working two jobs in the offseason. (To feed his wife and three kids, he drove a UPS truck; to feed his passion, he was a substitute teacher.) Despite sending the big club a steady stream of overachieving arms who'd outperformed their draft status—guys like Roy Oswalt (23rd round) and Carlos Hernandez (undrafted)—he couldn't break through the glass ceiling installed by Gerry Hunsicker, the old-school Astros GM who believed that to be a big league pitching

coach, you needed big league experience. But in 2004, after firing coach Burt Hooton as part of a midseason housecleaning, Hunsicker broke his rule and gave Hickey a try. The following season, Hickey helped Houston's hurlers post a 3.51 ERA, second best in MLB, and lead the Astros to the first World Series appearance in franchise history.

Nearly a decade later, the Rays' young staff couldn't care less that Hickey is one of seven current pitching coaches who never played in the majors. Instead, they see a meticulous game planner who spends up to six hours prepping for a series by watching video and compiling stats on opposing hitters. They see an everyman who speaks fluent Spanish and frequently catches his starters' bullpen sessions, traits so rare that reliever Jamey Wright, who has played for 10 teams, can't recall ever having a pitching coach who did either. Most important, they see an open-minded teacher who gives them space to find themselves. "The X-factor with Hick," Wright says, "is that he didn't pitch 15 years in the bigs, so he's not set in his ways." Adds Alex Cobb: "He lets us learn from our mistakes." Maybe that's because he's learned from his own.

On Sept. 30, 2007, Hickey was arrested on DUI charges, the same day he finished his first season with Tampa Bay, one in which the Rays posted an MLB-worst 5.53 ERA. Given his résumé at the time, it would've been easy for the Rays to ax Hickey, who admits he was

"prepared to be dismissed." Instead, the club re-signed him to another one-year deal. "I'm a big believer that you don't abandon someone just because they made a mistake," manager Joe Maddon says. "We saw a lot of talent in Hick."

Today, it's hard not to draw a parallel between the Rays' success—they've won at least 90 games four of the past five years and are on pace to win 90 again this season—and Hickey. But the coach is quick to downplay his role. "Not too much credit, not too much blame," he says.

Adds the grizzled vet Wright: "Could they bring somebody else in here to do what Hick's done? Maybe.

"But you'd sure have a lot of pissed-off pitchers." **E**

THE PLAYLIST

DAVID PRICE
RAYS PITCHER

What the Cy Young winner listens to before taking the mound.



KNOB BROKE
Young Jeezy
2012

I'M ME
Lil Wayne
2007

FINALLY MOVING
Pretty Lights
2006

CRYSTALLIZE
Lindsey Stirling
2012



GOLDIE
ASAP Rocky
2013

SPACE CADETS
Future
2012

CLOCKS
Coldplay
2002

I NEVER HAD ANY
INTENTION OF COACHING.

—JIM HICKEY, AFTER PITCHING IN THE MINORS SEVEN YEARS



Manager Joe Maddon stuck by Hickey in 2007 when he didn't need to. Since 2008, the Rays have the second-best winning percentage in baseball, and David Price is a Cy Young winner.



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COVERT TRACKING

MLB TEAMS USE MILITARY TECHNOLOGY TO ANALYZE PITCHERS—THEN GUARD THE DATA LIKE MILITARY SECRETS. *By Paul Swydan*

The image of analytics geeks warring with grizzled baseball scouts is so 2003. Today the real battle in MLB front offices is the race to find the most advanced data. So perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that 17 teams are analyzing pitchers using technology originally developed to track missiles.

The system, called TrackMan, measures more than half a dozen elements about every pitch—from the pitcher's arm extension and release height to the trajectory, spin rate and speed of the ball as it hurtles toward home plate. First used in sports to

match golfers with clubs, TrackMan made its MLB debut at the 2009 Home Run Derby, but until recently the system's radar and cameras had to be physically mounted in ballparks. Now TrackMan has gone mobile, allowing scouts to use a portable radar to measure major league players and prospects wherever they find them.

Team execs say the major appeal of the technology is that it quantifies concepts scouts look out for anyway. A "sneaky fastball," as a scout would call it, boils down to optimal "effective velocity," the combination of pitch speed

and release point. And because the system tracks so many elements of each pitch, each team can use it in its own way. "We can sit with a coach who has never seen TrackMan before, and he can sit there and watch it for two innings and know more about what it says than any of us ever will," says Josh Orenstein, TrackMan's director of baseball operations and analytics.

Because TrackMan gives consistent measurements no matter the conditions, a prospect in a hitter-friendly league can be fairly compared with one whose environs favor

pitchers. And early adopters agree that they're just beginning to understand the myriad ways to use it. One team executive said his club is developing three programs to use the technology—one for scouting, one for the farm system and one for the majors—but refused to discuss specific data they track. Not surprisingly, no other team was willing to talk about its data gathering either.

"We had a major league pitching coach say to us last year, 'Data is the best s— in the world,'" Orenstein says. And the best kind of data is the kind no one else has.

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3. A FULL REPORT

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STEP.

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RUNNING OUT
THE CLOCK.

THEY'RE
PLAYING
SMASH-
MOUTH
FOOTBALL.

MARCHING
DOWN THE
FIELD.

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GO-TO GUY.

GONNA HAVE
TO SETTLE FOR
THREE.

THEY'VE GOT
TO CONTROL
THE LINE OF
SCRIMMAGE.

HE RAN
OUT OF
REAL ESTATE.

THEY'RE
IN THE
RED ZONE.



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IT IS.

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TO THE GAME.

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PLAYING
AGAINST THE
CLOCK.

TIME TO GO
BIG, OR GO
HOME.

THEY CAN
PRACTICALLY
TASTE
VICTORY.

THEY LEFT
IT ALL ON THE
FIELD.

THIS GUY
JUST LOVES
FOOTBALL.

TACK ON
AN EXTRA
POINT.

BET THEY'D
LIKE TO HAVE
THAT ONE
BACK.

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MIRACLE.

HE'S GOT ALL
DAY TO
THROW IT.

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GUT-CHECK
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VOICE LESSON

FOR OHIO STATE TO WIN IT ALL, **BRAXTON MILLER** MUST CALM HIS FEET AND SPEAK HIS MIND.

By Sarah Turcotte

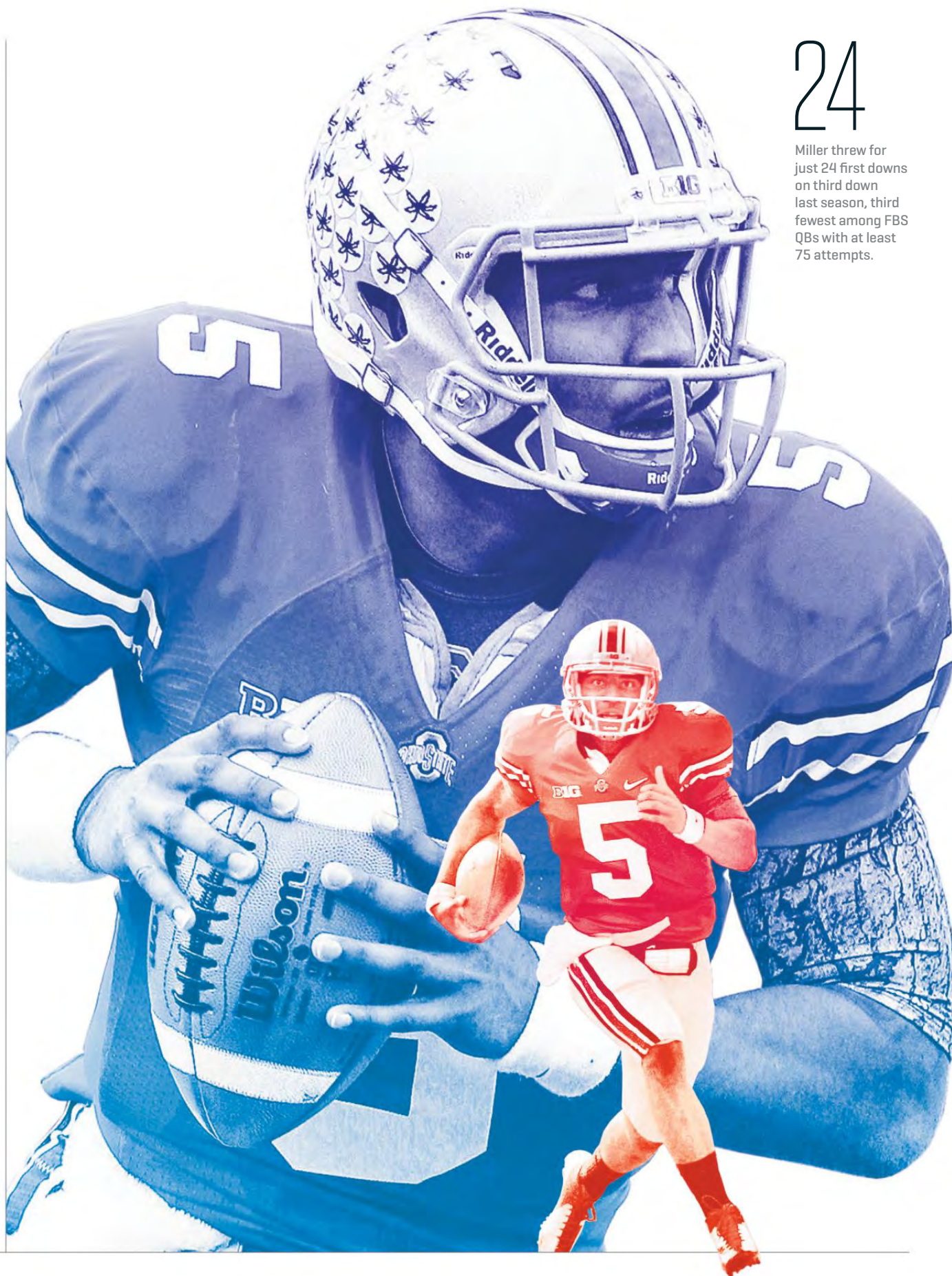
"I'm not a front-row type of guy," Braxton Miller says with a sheepish shrug. "But I know now I need to sit there, so that's where you'll find me."

The Buckeyes' junior quarterback has just finished a morning tutoring session where he stayed true to his word. This is the new Braxton, the one who holds teammates accountable, schedules his own "mandatory" practice sessions with the entire offense and has overcome his third-row attitude. The transformation began the minute OSU's undefeated 2012 season ended without a bowl. Due to an NCAA-mandated postseason ban from the Jim Tressel-Terrelle Pryor era of shame, Urban Meyer's first Buckeyes squad was left to wonder what might have been.

But Miller (6'2", 215) still won Big Ten offensive POY honors, ranking third among FBS passers (minimum 10 QB starts) with 105.9 rushing yards per game. His face was plastered across Columbus; fellow students asked for pictures in class and followed him from study hall to his car, attention that the mellow kid from Huber Heights, Ohio, wasn't wired to handle. So coaches and teammates pulled

24

Miller threw for just 24 first downs on third down last season, third fewest among FBS QBs with at least 75 attempts.



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THE MAGAZINE

their star aside to offer some advice: If you're going to be the face of our team, you have to lead, and not just by example.

"His best quality is humility," says Jack Mewhort, a senior offensive tackle who began saving Miller a front-row seat at team meetings. "But that's been a hurdle for him too. He was afraid to jaw because he didn't want to be a jerk by getting on players who aren't as naturally talented. We told him we want him to speak up. He's taken it to heart and run with it, and that kid can run."

But can he throw? Last year Miller's 170 passing ypg and 58% completion rate didn't rank top five in the Big Ten, much less compare with high-profile dual threats like Johnny Manziel (285, 68%) and Marcus Mariota



Miller [No. 5] has no problem getting loud on Saturday, but Meyer (above left) wants his QB to be more vocal the other six days of the week.

(206, 69%). To be fair, Miller was supposed to have 2011 to acclimate as a backup, but Tattoo-gate sent Tressel and Pryor packing, and the true freshman became the starter for a 6-7 season under interim coach Luke Fickell. Then Miller had to learn Meyer's dizzying system within months.

"I'd grade myself a C," Miller says. "My scramble numbers were awful. My feet got jittery

when my first option wasn't available. And I always thought leading by example was enough. That's not true. Biting my tongue isn't going to make us better."

Determined to raise his grade, Miller paid his way to California for footwork lessons with QB coach George Whitfield Jr. over winter break. Meyer enrolled him and other vets in a leadership course (yes, he sat up front).

On the field, teammates already see (and hear) the results. Miller has added a wrinkle to his warmup: Now workouts don't start until he hits receivers on each sideline with five straight to the chest. "It's a powerful feeling when he walks onto the field," says senior backup quarterback Kenny Guiton. "We want to play up to his level. He's made it clear that if we don't want to put in the work, we have no

place on his team. And make no mistake, this is his team."

Miller is even talking to himself. "I have four little monsters in my head," he says. One tells him he can pass for 300 yards in at least eight regular-season games. Another calms those happy feet. The smart one reminds him to stay healthy by telling his O-line to hold now and then. Finally, there's the loudmouth, constantly buzzing in his ear about a chance to play for the BCS championship.

And the Heisman?

"Oh yeah, I think about that too," he says. "But if I can check off the list in my head, then I should have a good chance."

Not only to be sitting in the front row but standing front and center. ■



ANDREW NORWELL

OHIO STATE OG

BRAXTON MILLER'S
ROAD GRADER

CAREER GAMES/STARTS

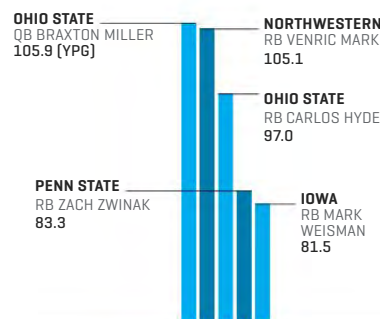
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[TEAM-HIGH 862 SNAPS IN 2012]

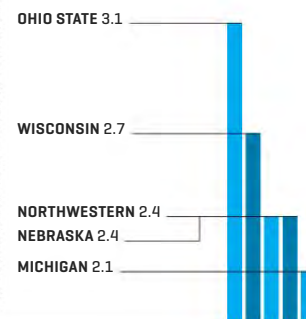
FOLLOW HIS LEAD

Senior All-Big Ten guard Andrew Norwell is one of the most versatile O-linemen in the country, an attribute that is all the more important since the suspension of RB Carlos Hyde for at least three games. Norwell's ability to pull and pick up edge defenders will help make up for the loss of Hyde, who often did the dirty work as Braxton Miller's lead blocker and pile pusher in Urban Meyer's QB run package. Norwell [6'6", 319] has an impressive ability to "change his contact point and must read the defense like a running back," says ESPN analyst Chris Spielman, a former OSU All-American. And once Hyde returns, the timing and rhythm between Miller and Norwell will only be stronger. A match made for a Heisman.

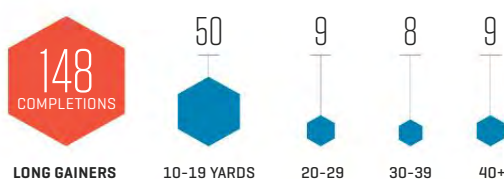
TOP RETURNING BIG TEN RUSHERS



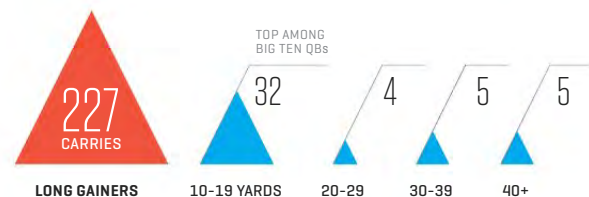
BIG TEN RUSHING TDs PER GAME IN 2012



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TECHNIQUE

BRINGING HIS EH-GAME: RISING CANADIAN STAR MILOS RAONIC REVEALS HOW HE SERVES UP THOSE WICKED 150 MPH ACES.

Milos Raonic rocketed to 13th this summer in the ATP rankings, highest ever for a Canadian, thanks in no small part to the biggest shot in his sport. In 2012 Raonic racked up more aces per match (16.2) and seized more service games (93%) than any other player. This year the 22-year-old had won 80% of his first-serve points through Aug. 9. The 6'5", 198-pounder idolized Pete Sampras and tried to emulate the 14-time grand slam champ's signature shot. "I didn't always have someone to practice with," he says. "But if you have a court and balls, you can serve." Here, Raonic tips his hand and shows us how he unfolds all the aces. —ANNA KATHERINE CLEMMONS

1 "First I focus on the ball and what I want to achieve. Once my arm is behind me, I watch my opponent to see if he's cheating in either direction."

2 "As I toss the ball, I extend my left oblique and raise my left shoulder to open up my chest. I toss it high because I get more power when I'm at full extension."

3 "This is where the work starts. I generate power from my quads, calves and toes—and contract my abs and pecs to push me forward and to accelerate my arm around quickly."

4 "I reach as high as I can. That way, I can hit different serves by varying the angle of my forearm and wrist. And because of my height, I'm able to hit down on the ball and create more angle between the ball and the court."

5 "I land on the left foot, then the right follows, and I widen my stance so I'm ready to move in any direction. If my feet are too close together, balance will be an issue."



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PLAYBOOK / TENNIS

WHO'S GOT KLOUT **ESPN THE MAG**

ANDREA PETKOVIC

German pro Andrea Petkovic has cultivated a sizable social media following that belies her modest WTA ranking (50th). Via her playful video volleys and clever 140-character passing shots, the 2011 U.S. Open quarterfinalist lobs winners—in four languages, no less—online. Petkovic tells *The Mag* how she puts topspin on her tweets and persuades fellow players to hold court on YouTube. —SAM ALIPOUR

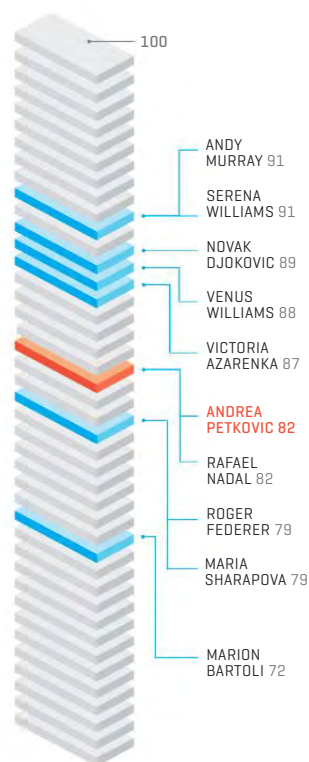
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TOP TWEET
"MY DEAREST RYAN GOSLING—
SAVE ME FROM THIS EMO STATE
I'M IN. THANK YOU. SINCERELY
YOURS, ANDREA"



KLOUT-O-METER



This is the latest in a series of collaborations between Klout and ESPN to highlight athletes with social media stroke. For the full interview, go to ESPN.com/tennis. Stats through Aug. 9.

How often do you use social media? I drive 45 minutes back and forth to practice and—I shouldn't tell you this—I check Twitter at the red lights. Luckily we have a lot of stoplights in Germany, since my best tweets happen when I'm sitting there. But I have to hurry. That's why I have a lot of typos in my tweets.

Gotcha. So when we see typos in your tweets, we should get the hell off German roads. Exactly!

You tweet in German, English, Serbian and French. How do you decide which language to use? I was born in Bosnia, grew up in Germany, my parents are Serbian, English is the world's language, and I learned French in school. Each language has a certain vibe. A lot of tweets are funnier in English than in German, because German isn't a funny language.

You're known for your zany humor, which comes across on your YouTube channel, where you record under the pseudonym Petkorazzi. Why YouTube?

I started out with a blog, but people on the Internet are into quick things, not pages and pages of an athlete's writing. So I did a video diary, and then I got creative. Most fans see athletes on the court, where we're tense and mad and crazy. I wanted to show our silly side.

And you do that well. Your most popular video is "What Tennis Players Do When it Rains in Wimbledon." Apparently they Hula-Hoop. Why don't we see more behind-the-scenes stuff? It's not common for players to carry cameras around at events. That video was taken with an iPhone. I also think most players are guarded. They don't want to show their fun side, maybe because it makes them look vulnerable. But it's important to show that we're not just intense creatures who don't have fun.

A key to your videos is the participation of players like John Isner and Novak Djokovic. Do you surprise them on the spot or do you schedule the shoots? It's best when it's spontaneous. I don't tell them beforehand that I want to put it on YouTube. I just film it, so the players are themselves and forget that they're on camera. But I always ask afterward, "Are you okay with me putting this on YouTube?" And all of them are.

What can we expect from your next Petkorazzi video? I want to book a disco room and get each top-20 player, male and female, to do a few seconds of the dance move they would do in a club if nobody knew who they were. But don't tell anybody. I don't want them stealing my idea.

JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES

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1913



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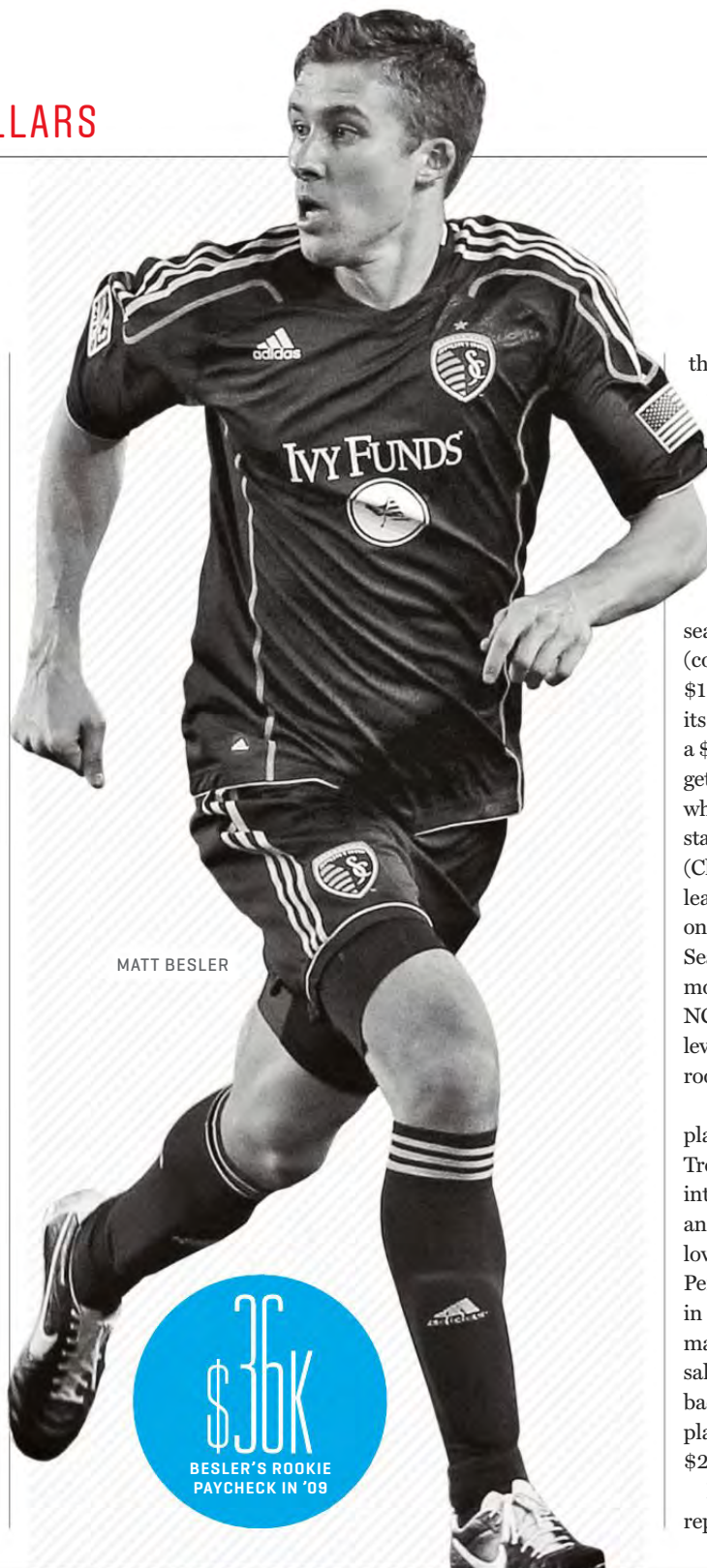
MLS CAN'T PAY EVERY PLAYER CLINT DEMPSEY MONEY, BUT MORE YANKS ARE STILL CASHING IN.

By Doug McIntyre

When Sporting Kansas City defender Matt Besler hit free agency last December, his dream was to sign with a team in England's cash-flush Premier League. But interest from EPL struggler QPR waned, and a harsh reality set in: Big league money wasn't available for a then-25-year-old who'd yet to play with the U.S. national team.

"So if I did go to Europe," Besler says, "it would have been to a club in Belgium or in England's [second-tier] Championship." Even then, those teams weren't willing to make a concrete offer without a tryout, and Besler would have made about \$350,000 at best, likely on a one-year deal.

After factoring in higher tax rates and the cost of living abroad, accepting SKC's three-year, \$600,000 offer—more



MATT BESLER

than twice what Besler made during his first four pro seasons—was a no-brainer.

Despite nearly doubling in size over the last decade, MLS still isn't profitable. It takes home about \$28M per season in broadcast rights (compared with the NFL's \$1.9B payday), forcing each of its 19 teams to operate within a \$2.95M payroll. Owners do get three cap exemptions, which allow them to pay big stars out of their own pockets (Clint Dempsey will earn a league high of \$5M this year on a four-season contract with Seattle Sounders FC), but most rosters are filled out by NCAA draftees with little leverage—and an average rookie salary of \$46,500.

Problem was, some of those players, including goalkeeper Troy Perkins, developed into solid contributors and sought more money in low-profile foreign circuits. Perkins played in Norway in 2008 and 2009 and made three times his MLS salary of \$85,000. Now back in North America, he plays for Montreal and earns \$225,000 a year.

MLS had no real plan for replacing veterans, and soon

the talent drain on the pitch became evident. So this season, the league—boosted in part by a nine-figure windfall from an investment firm—began allowing teams to spend an extra cap-exempt \$225,000 on homegrown players. In Besler's case, those retention funds made the difference between staying and going and kept him in MLS's middle class. "Now players are thinking that unless it's the Premier League or La Liga," says MLS VP Todd Durbin, "staying in MLS is as good as playing anywhere else."

Keeping talent at home doesn't only increase depth and improve the product. It's also a good investment.

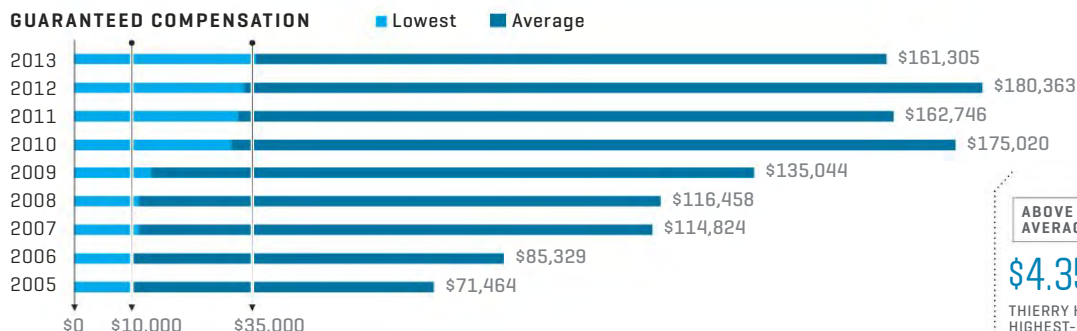
Since re-upping, Besler has established himself as a starter with the national team—an opportunity that might not have come had he been toiling in obscurity overseas. And if the Yanks advance at next summer's World Cup, Besler stands to make an additional \$300,000 in bonuses from U.S. Soccer. Premier League offers surely would follow, giving SKC a chance to parlay its relatively paltry investment into a seven-figure transfer fee.

That's a good return in more ways than one.

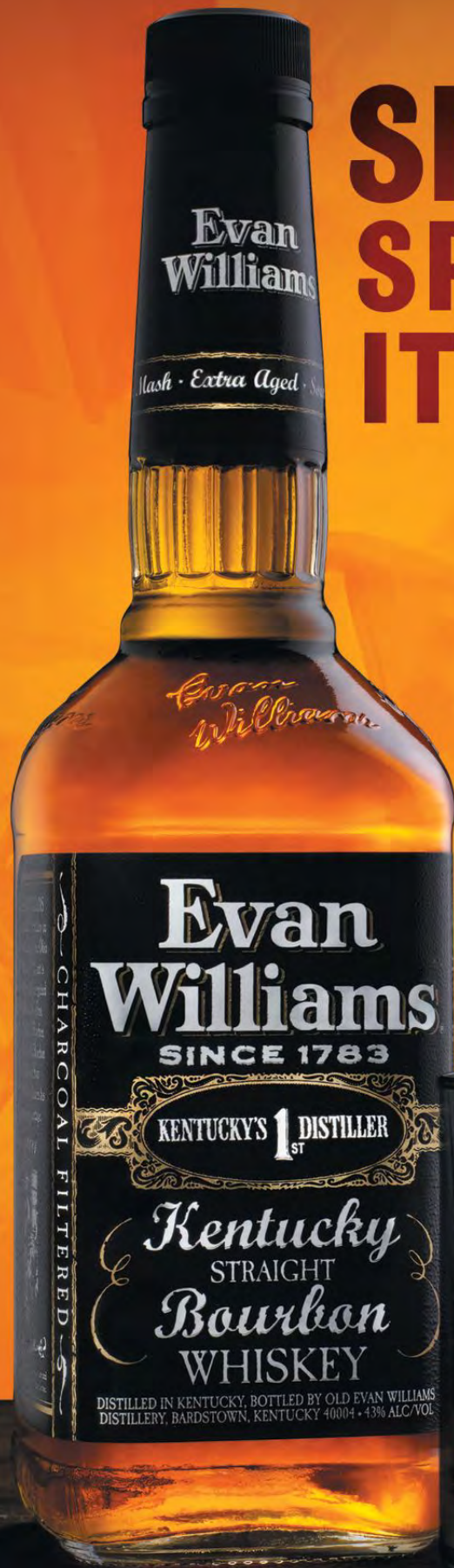
THE 99%

Since 2005, MLS's highest-paid player was on the Galaxy (see David Beckham's yearly \$6.5M) or the Red Bulls, with two exceptions: Chivas USA (2006) and now Seattle. But not everyone pulls that kind of paycheck. Here's how the average MLS pay stacks up.

FIGURES COMPILED BY ESPN STATS & INFORMATION AT START OF 2013 SEASON.



SMOOTHNESS SPEAKS FOR ITSELF.



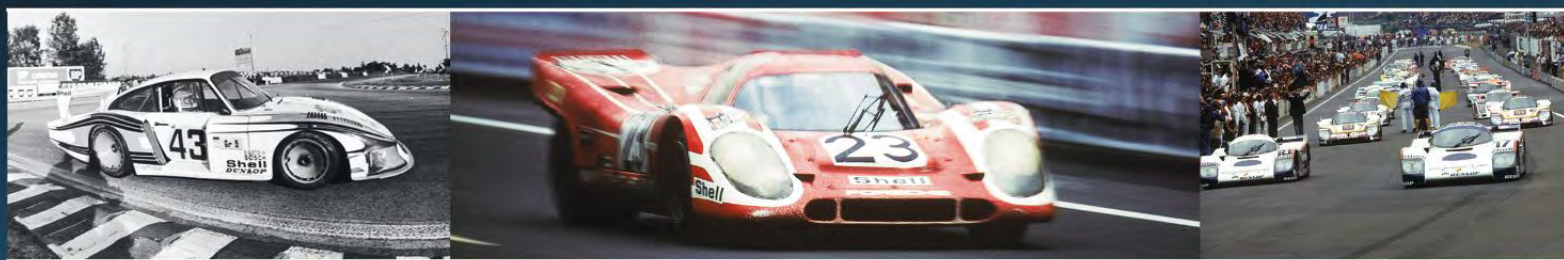
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There are few places as closely associated with the Porsche name as this small town, which hosts the oldest active sports car race in endurance racing history. **Porsche has made motorsports history** at Le Mans, taking **16 overall victories** to become the most successful automaker at the world's most famous long distance race.

Known as the Grand Prix of Endurance and Efficiency, Le Mans takes place over a **24-hour period** on an 8.48 mile (13.65 km) circuit containing a mix of closed public roads and specialized track designed to push both the cars and the drivers to their limits. One of the fastest race tracks in the world, **almost 75% of the course is run at full throttle**.

Porsche is known for consistently pushing the envelope on the Le Mans track. With strong founding principles guiding development and strategy for more than 60 years, Porsche constantly questions even the smallest component of each vehicle and fully rethinks every detail. Critical strategies that make **intelligent use of technology and performance** to achieve more from less are then directly applied to the company's production vehicles. In fact, **the advancement of the production vehicles** is exactly why Porsche races in the first place.

From the **very first overall victory in 1970** to the incredible 1983 race when Porsche swept 1st through 8th places, to the **16th legendary win in 1998**, Porsche's enduring legacy at Le Mans remains true. In 2014, Porsche is finally returning to compete at the highest levels of motorsports and continue writing history one race at a time.

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To revisit the moments in Le Mans motorsport history, and to get a behind-the-scenes look as we prepare our return, visit porsche.com/mission2014.

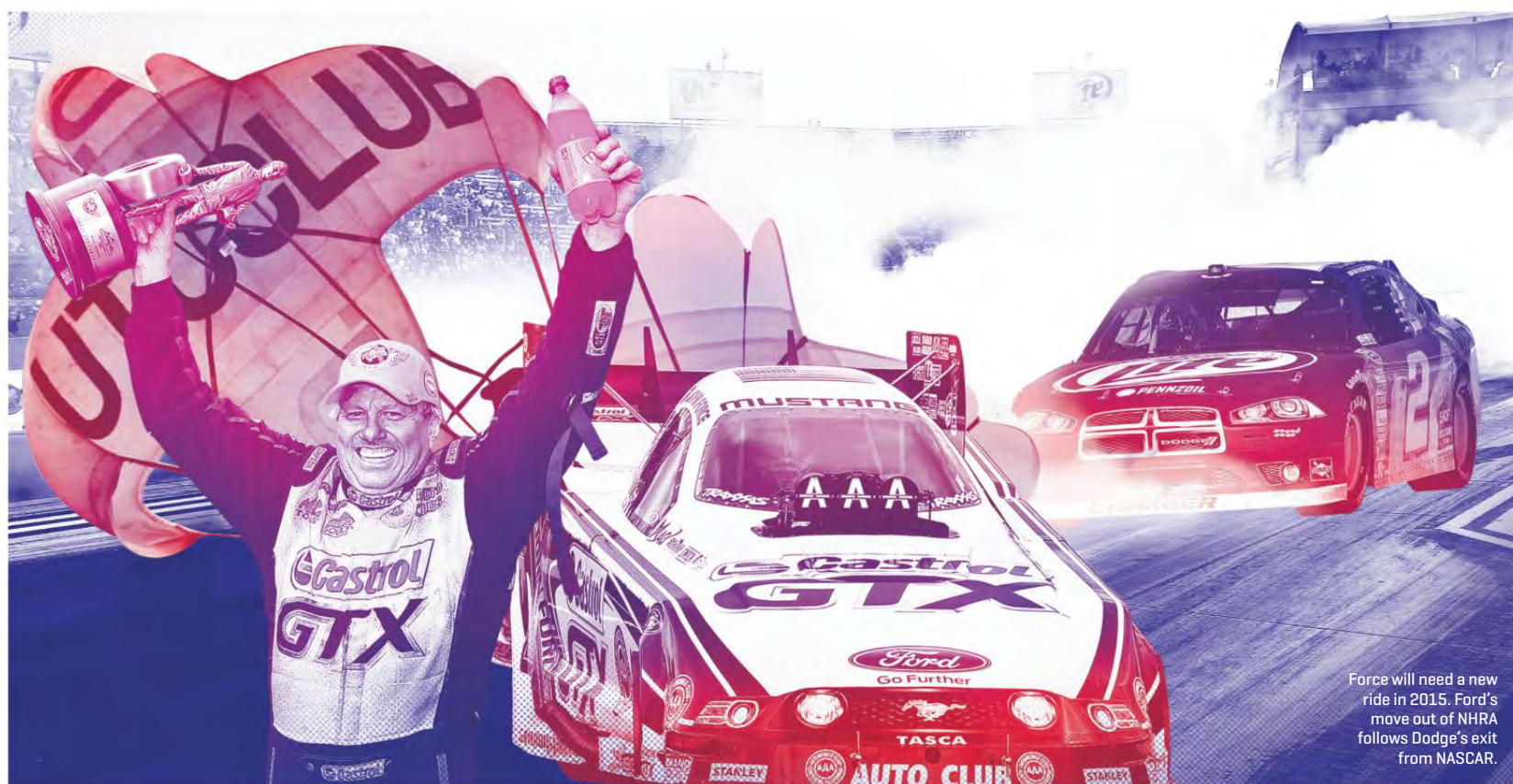
Mission 2014. Our Return.



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PORSCHE



Force will need a new ride in 2015. Ford's move out of NHRA follows Dodge's exit from NASCAR.

NOT SO FUNNY

FORD'S PLANNED EXIT FROM NHRA IS JUST THE LATEST ROUND OF **MUSICAL CHAIRS** IN RACING. AND THIS TIME, A LEGEND IS BEING LEFT WITHOUT A SEAT. *By Ryan McGee*

For 11 years, Dodge worked to win a Cup Series title in its second go-round in NASCAR's top division. Finally last fall, the auto manufacturer reached the podium with driver Brad Keselowski and Penske Racing. Then, poof, Dodge vanished from the sport, taking its dollars elsewhere in pursuit of a younger audience.

Now Ford has decided that after 2014 it will leave the NHRA's top divisions, pulling its sponsorship and technical support from three teams, including John Force Racing, a pairing that has produced 11 Funny Car titles in 16 seasons.

Welcome to modern motorsports economics, where even winning championships is not enough for teams and sanctioning bodies to keep the precious support of the world's biggest carmakers. From Detroit to Japan to Munich, the once seemingly bottomless pool of motorsports cash is now essentially a line item of a larger marketing budget—the same account that pays for TV ads and billboards.

"The days of a brand pouring cash into every racing series around the world are behind us," says Roger Penske, who helped lure Chevy back

to IndyCar last season while accelerating Dodge's exit from NASCAR by planning to move his teams to Ford. "There are hard decisions to be made concerning where you go racing. You have to ask where you can best reach the buyers you want."

Both Ford and Dodge are searching for younger audiences/car buyers. They are committed to rally racing, particularly the X Games, as well as sports car racing. Beyond that, their approaches are vastly different.

"We reviewed our [NHRA] investment, the returns from activation, television ratings and overall product/technology relevancy," says Ford Racing director Jamie Allison, explaining the criteria the company used to determine which series would get its dollars going forward. Though Ford ultimately decided to pull out of NHRA, Allison

says the company still plans to support grassroots drag racers, has expanded its NASCAR involvement and continues to ramp up its rally racing program.

Dodge, meanwhile, has replaced its NASCAR sponsorships with a huge NHRA presence, as well as Rally X support. "The Dart customer does not watch NASCAR," says Dodge Motorsports chief Ralph Gilles, referring to the appeal of the compact, high-tech rally car versus the bulkier Charger. "The priority was to put our money in different places."

All the shifting gears is making team owners dizzy. "This is business, so you can't take it personally," says Chip Ganassi, who has fielded cars in the NASCAR, Champ Car, IndyCar and Grand-Am series. "But if you're running a smaller team or in a smaller series, it hurts more. It's hard

not to take that personally."

That brings us back to JFR, which fields three Mustangs at an estimated cost of \$8 million a year to Ford. For a NASCAR team, that's not a lot of money; in drag racing, it's a devastating loss. And that explains why John Force is so disappointed. "The mistake I made is that I kind of believed that some things are forever," he says of his relationship with Ford. "I felt we were perfect."

There's no such thing in the world of racing sponsorships.

3

Ford won 11 Funny Car titles in 16 years with John Force Racing. The company is having even greater success in Global RallyCross, winning the first two official championships and having a third title all but locked up.

IT TAKES A CLASSIC TO RESTORE ONE.



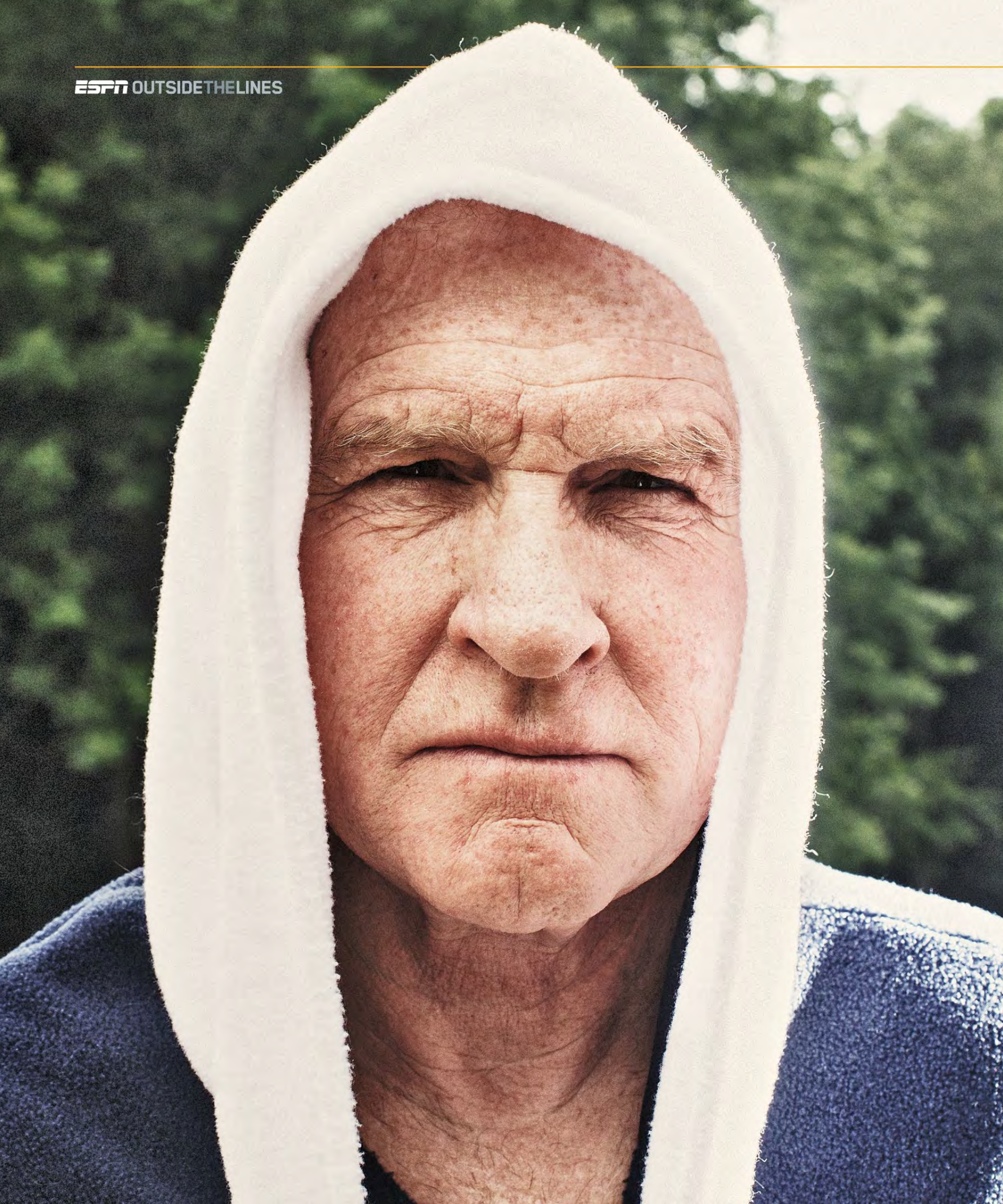
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THE LOSSES OF DAN GABLE

WRESTLING'S MOST FAMOUS WINNER IS TAKING ON ONE FINAL BATTLE: TO SAVE HIS SPORT AND ALL HE'S EVER BEEN.

BY WRIGHT THOMPSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW CUTRARO



Feb. 12, Iowa City, Iowa

ON THE MORNING THE IOC ANNOUNCED IT WOULD DROP WRESTLING FROM THE OLYMPICS,

Dan Gable was a continent away, fast asleep. It was dark outside. His wife, Kathy, sat at the computer, waiting on the coffemaker to start. She scrolled through the Iowa wrestling message boards, and one thread caught her attention. When she finished reading, she hurried to the bedroom. Dan was on the left side of the bed, on his stomach. That sticks in her mind, for some reason—him peaceful, unaware. She tapped him, asked if he knew anything about the Olympics getting rid of wrestling in 2020. He mumbled something and kept sleeping, for a few moments, until the information traveled through his subconscious and he rushed to the computer. The news rearranged his world. Sitting by himself in the dark, Gable struggled not to cry. He called the head of USA Wrestling and blurted, “Tell me it isn’t true!”

Gable’s phone started to ring. One by one, his four daughters called. They said they loved him and that he could save wrestling. His oldest, Jenni, called from her home up the road and

described the look on her son’s face when she told him. He’s 9. An unspoken dream seemed to die in his eyes. This hurt Dan most of all. As the sun rose, he pushed away his pain to do the thing he did best: fight.

DAN GABLE PACES suite No. 8 at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines, trying to decide whether he can watch the last Iowa match of the NCAA wrestling tournament. It’s March. The Hawkeyes, whom he hasn’t coached in 16 years, are having a miserable weekend, with no national champions. Just the other morning, a former Iowa wrestler saw Gable punishing an unsuspecting elliptical machine in the hotel gym. When the machine had asked his age, Gable, who is 64, typed in 29, as always, and began attacking the pedals, grinding out frustrations about the IOC and the collapsing Hawkeyes.

“How you been?” the wrestler asked.

“I’ve been better,” Gable said.

Now, in the last hour of the tournament, a

scowl anchors his face. His eyes jump from side to side, scanning the mats. The arena sound system pours out decibels, sludgy bass lines and screaming guitars. Derek St. John, the Iowa 157 and last hope to salvage a national title from a tournament gone wrong, crouches at the center of the mat. Gable pumps his feet and looks like he might get sick.

“I don’t think I can sit here,” he says, stepping out of the suite into the hallway.

His life has been one of victory: He went 64–0 as a high school wrestler, 118–1 in college, won an Olympic gold medal in Munich without surrendering a point, won 15 national titles in 21 seasons as the Iowa coach. Outside in the concourse, feeling weak, then feeling guilty about feeling weak, he knows what must be done. Gable triumphs again—over himself. He swings open the door and steps back inside. “I’m gonna watch,” he declares, then almost to himself adds, “I can’t be such a chickenshit.”

St. John pushes his opponent into the mat. “Ride him like a dog!” Gable yells. The first two periods pass. The match is tied. Sometimes Gable just mouths words, intense, forgetting to speak. St. John is tied with 48 seconds left. The Penn State fans in the next suite are peeking over at the red-faced, bald man losing his shit. At rest, Gable looks like a retired math teacher, but under the influence of anger and adrenaline, he transforms. His eyes seem to shift from a soft hazel to a dull black, the color of an alien, subterranean element. Given the right stimuli, like a vital Iowa match, he seems a good sweat from his final wrestling weight of 149. The eruption arrives. Watching Gable melt down is





In his home gym, Gable jokes that the set of *Rocky* was stolen from him.

GABLE SAW WRESTLING AS A SPORT WHERE PAIN COULD BE TRADED FOR ABSOLUTION.

like watching Picasso paint. He shakes and strains, a rocket on the pad. The flying spit and sudden fits of decorum, like “Jiminy Christmas!”—Tourette’s in reverse—are followed by growling, intense curses.

“SONOFABITCH!” he roars down into the fulcrum of noise.

St. John bucks and twists, and with 38 seconds left, he breaks his opponent’s grip and takes a 3-2 lead. He is going to win the national championship. Someone says, “This match is over,” which pushes Gable to the edge. “No, it ain’t!” he yells, his voice sounding like a gut-shot deer looks, ragged from days of this. “It’s not over!”

“Four ... three ... two ... one,” a friend counts down, and the horn sounds. Everyone in the Gable suite celebrates, except Gable himself, who is almost panting, his eyes glassy. Without anyone noticing, he slips out the door into the concourse. Leaning over, with his head down, the tears come. Soon he is sobbing, his back to the suite. His shoulders heave up and down, shaking. A former Iowa wrestler stops to swap war stories, then suddenly backs up, a look of horror on his face. Mackie Gable, Dan’s youngest daughter, steps outside and finds her father weeping.

“I’ve never seen him like that ever,” she says.

Gable doesn’t say anything. What would he say? Not even he really knows what’s happening to him. Mackie seems unsure, taking a step toward him, then a step back. She doesn’t know what to do. She ducks into the suite, scans the room and calls, “Mom?” Kathy Gable comforts Dan, talking softly to him, and soon he returns, drying his eyes, trying to explain something he doesn’t understand.

Later that night, some friends sit around the hotel bar, just as baffled as Mackie. Why was the hardest dude on the planet crying because a wrestler he doesn’t coach won a match? Most of the guys at the table are young, and they see Gable as superhuman. But an old friend, Mike Doughty, has known Gable for decades.

“Every once in a while,” he tells them, “I’ll be traveling with Dan and things like that will hit. He has these things locked in trapdoors and *eeeeek ...*”—he makes the creaking sound of an old hinge opening—“... they start coming out.”

1955, Waterloo, Iowa

People think Dan Gable isn’t afraid of anything, but that’s not true. He is deeply afraid of one thing. Hidden in his past, before he ever wrestled a match, there’s a story most people don’t know. Even his four daughters have never heard it. When he was a small boy, his parents drank, and they fought. The Gables always seemed to be one bad night from breaking apart, leaving Dan without a family: alone. So when Mack and Katie went out on the town, young Dan would make his way to the front of the house. He would station himself in the big picture window, scared that they’d come home and get divorced, or maybe not come home at all. From time to time, he’d suck his thumb. All night, he’d peer down the street, looking for headlights.

BACK HOME, HE’S got a 45-acre spread he’s put together in pieces over the years, a place to live out his uneasy retirement. This is where he was before the wrestling tournament, and where he would return when it ended. Today, a month after the IOC decision, he sinks down into his hot tub, which overlooks a wide yard of snow, downrange from the two cement deer that, on occasion, real deer like to hump. Gable thinks this is hilarious. He’s soaking after his intense daily workout. There’s a sign above his head that says: WHAT HAPPENS IN THE HOT TUB STAYS IN THE HOT TUB.

Gable sighs, a look of mock resignation on

his face. “Nothing’s ever happened in the hot tub,” he says.

It’s late afternoon at the compound, near sunset. The buildings—the main house, his clubhouse with a sauna and gym, the barn with his axes and Everlast heavy bag—look like they belong in a Nordic postcard, all dark wood and peaked rooflines. He jokes that the set of *Rocky* was stolen from him.

He’s focused on overturning the IOC decision. When the news broke, Gable invited a reporter to his home outside Iowa City and to the NCAA wrestling tournament, which remains a holy week in his family. He’s still the most famous person in the world of wrestling. A Des Moines newspaper reporter once wore an Iowa hat to a Russian village during the Cold War, in the mountains near the Siberian border, where an American had never been. A young man stepped out of the crowd, pointed toward the hat and said one of the few English words he knew: “Gable.”

He sinks down farther into the water. The heat helps him think. He’s been doing a lot of that lately, out here by himself, looking back at a life of competition and pain.

Steam rises off the water.

“I never wore a mouthpiece,” he says suddenly.

He sticks out his tongue. Gouges and divots cover the bottom, like a target-practice soda can, deep scars and even holes, dozens of them. Wearing a mouthpiece would have prevented the holes and the mouthfuls of blood he swallowed and spit out, but it would also have made him weak, made his jaw slide, made him feel vulnerable. He welcomed the hurt. Now he clenches his teeth. He’s always punished weakness with suffering, putting on a war mask for the world and for himself. His face hardens, his mouth curving into a frown, his muscles firing, looking like a weapon.

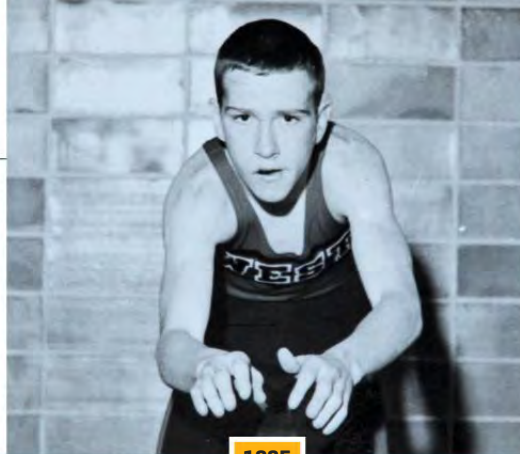
“It makes you strong!” he roars.

Gable leaps from the hot tub and dives into the drift of snow.

“Ahhhhhhhh,” he moans, a cloud of vapor exploding as bare skin hits cold ground, moving his arms and legs back and forth, carving out wedges. Gable is spread-eagled in his backyard

The evolution of a legend

Gable went 64–0 at Waterloo's West High, then won 118 straight matches at Iowa State—only to lose his collegiate finale, in 1970, to Washington's Larry Owings. The upset galvanized Gable, and he didn't give up a single point at the 1972 Munich Olympics. His passion carried over to coaching, where his Iowa teams won 15 national titles in 21 years. Gable retired after the 1997 season.



making goddamn snow angels. Just as quickly he jumps back into the hot water, his body temperature skyrocketing, the snow melting off.

"It burns," he says, gritting his teeth, and he sounds supremely happy.

HIS JOURNEY HAS consumed all of their lives.

For years, if you saw Gable at a wrestling event, you saw his wife, Kathy, and his four little girls. At Carver-Hawkeye, they sat in section NN, seats 1-6, the first two rows. If you've seen him at a match lately, they're still there, grown up, screaming down at poorly performing wrestlers, questioning their manhood, urging a coach to "slap the shit" out of one who celebrates a poorly wrestled match. Forget winning an Olympic medal. Are you man enough to marry a Gable? His daughters are funny, pretty and intense. All ended up with former athletes, and only Molly lives outside the state of Iowa. Jenni and Annie both live in Iowa City. Mackie's just up the road in Dubuque, and they get together as much as they can, mostly around wrestling events. During a speech not long ago, Gable laughed about the rolling circus that travels with him. "My wrestling and family go together," he said. "It's always been that way, from day one with my mom and dad, my sister, my wife, four daughters, grandsons, son-in-laws. They're all here." Some coaches ignore their families on their climb to the top; Gable needed his to be with him, as Sherpas, eventually as fellow climbers. His career molded his family, then welded it together. Wrestling kept his daughters from sitting in a window looking for headlights.

Kathy Gable knew he needed to build his family around wrestling. A blue-eyed Iowa girl, hilarious but fierce in defending her family, she found a soul mate in Dan. She lived with the storm of his career because she loved his willingness to devote himself fully to something. Even now, she alone seems capable of seeing through the shell into the real Dan Gable. He turns to her for the simplest of questions, such as: "When did my mother die?" They first met at a party. She lived in Waterloo then, in high school, and Dan, at Iowa State, sometimes trained in his hometown. For their first date,

two years later, he invited her on a bike ride. Between that ride and their wedding some 12 months later, in 1974, he called her every night. The calls came from his desk at the Iowa wrestling office, after he'd finished coaching.

The Gables measured time in seasons, their world growing as small and insular as Dan's. Until high school, or maybe even college, Mackie thought the John Lennon song "Imagine" was written especially for a 1992 wrestling highlight video. She thought it was *about* wrestling, she admits, sheepishly. Dan's obsession became theirs. Even though he chose this life and they did not, that distinction became smaller and smaller until it ceased to matter at all. "He brought his work home with him a lot," Mackie says. "His life was his wrestling. When my dad was coaching, there would be some nights at home when it was scary."

He threw a mug through the Christmas tree. One night they heard a loud crash; Kathy had asked Dan why he wouldn't kick a wrestler named Rico Chiapparelli off the team if he was causing so many problems, and Gable flipped over the kitchen table. The girls' bedroom doors had holes in them; they'd slam and lock them, and Dan would punch through them. Boyfriends getting the tour would see the holes and make a mental note. The girls never actually felt in danger, just that they needed to stay clear. Before a match with main rival Oklahoma State, the girls knew not to talk to their dad, and if they saw him in the tunnel, not to expect a hello. They all shared the cost of his obsession.

Then, in 1997, burned out and with chronic pain in his hip, he quit.

Without wrestling, he felt something missing. So did his family. Mackie cried during the final news conference. Even though she says their relationship improved after he quit, since he suddenly had time to watch her play soccer, she also wanted him to keep coaching. It's hard to explain, this dichotomy, but when he gave up that job, they all lost something.

"I still don't think I have forgiven him," she says.

They needed the clarity of Gable's obsession. Without it, they were a different family. Mackie

was in elementary school when he quit. She wanted to wrestle in junior high school, but her mom wouldn't let her join the boys team. Instead, she volunteered to be the high school wrestling manager, staying after practice to clean the mats. Her reasons are her own, but it's hard not to see a girl trying to keep a world intact. They followed him on his journey and counted his successes as their own. "Our gold medal," Mackie starts to say one day, laughing, correcting herself. "*My dad's gold medal* hangs above the fireplace. It's been there our whole life. It's almost like something we've looked up to."

During the holidays, Gable sits in front of his television and watches *White Christmas*. He's seen it hundreds of times, sometimes alone, sometimes with his kids piled around. It's about Gen. Waverly, who is relieved of his command and struggles to build a new life. At the end, Gen. Waverly puts on his old uniform and is greeted by the soldiers who loved him during the war, who sing "The Old Man." This is the Gable family's favorite part, because it echoes their own lives: a general and his troops, happy to be finished with the battle but missing the fight. At the end, Dan always falls silent, tears in his eyes, no longer thinking about an old movie but about his wife and his girls.

"We'll follow the old man wherever he wants to go," the song goes. "Because we love him."

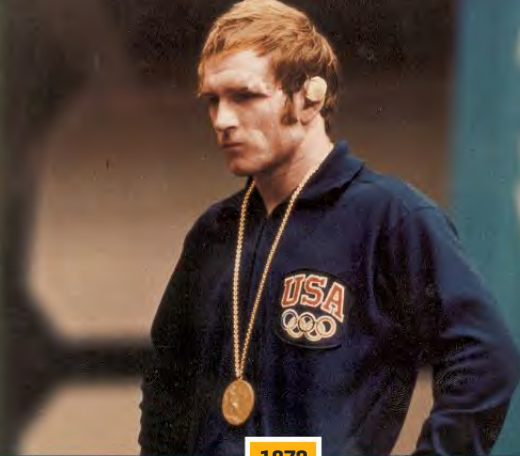
GABLE SPENDS HIS days trying to be useful. There's a wrestling-size hole in his life, and he is always trying to fill it. His struggle is never clearer than when he stops by the Iowa wrestling office, to pick up mail that still arrives there addressed to him, or to sign autographs. One afternoon, Gable comes into the reception area, making small talk. He asks the secretary, "You need me?"

She smiles and pulls out a stack of posters for him to sign.

"Don't I always need you, Dan?"

"I hope so," he says.

She gives directions, telling him to just sign his name, or to add a personal note to a specific fan. After finishing, he walks up a narrow stairwell, toward the lobby of Carver-Hawkeye



1972



1975



1997

Arena. People nod when he passes, and he zips his Iowa wrestling coat. It's freezing outside. A bitter laugh escapes his lips, and he looks tired and uncertain.

"I don't know where I'm at when it comes to this Olympic wrestling," he says. "I almost feel—not useless, but ..."

The IOC's decision is based on internal politics, he explains. The international wrestling governing body's leader and lieutenants weren't respected in the Olympic community and were told repeatedly to make changes to the sport, to fix many of the confusing rules that had been added over the years. They refused. After the IOC decision—its ruling can be cemented or reversed in a September meeting, during which wrestling, squash or baseball and softball will be chosen—the president of FILA, the international wrestling body, was pushed out by his own board. Gable has used his fame to bring awareness, and to lobby behind the scenes, constantly working the phones or getting on planes. He's on fire these days, energized. Gable is on the newly formed Committee for the Preservation of Olympic Wrestling. Dan calls it "C'Pow," like the sound a fist makes on someone's jaw. This battle has, as Kathy Gable says, awakened a sleeping giant. He is fully himself again, filling up the leather calendar he takes everywhere. "Dan is a man of purpose," his friend Doughty says. "This is a new purpose."

Part of his role with CPOW is helping redesign the rules, an important request from the IOC. But Gable fears that the old FILA politics will keep the rules from changing. He fears he is powerless to create that change.

"I don't know," he says now. "I'd like a little more ability to have my fingers on it."

Outside Carver-Hawkeye, he takes small, sliding steps toward his truck, past the statue of him put up a year ago. The bronze Gable isn't lifting his fists in victory, or wagging a finger, but raising his arms in what wrestling fans recognize as a stalling call. It's as if the statue of Lombardi outside Lambeau Field were forever calling delay of game, demanding his teams keep pressing. It's perfect, really. There was no greater sin for a Gable wrestler than to be caught

stalling—backing up, eating clock, not attacking and destroying—and once Gable even screamed at a ref to call it on his own guy. The statue is addressing everyone who passes, demanding that they keep fighting. Even before the IOC decision, Gable worried about the future of his sport and hoped to inspire people to save it. On the plaque, he wanted the inscription to say **STALLING**, as if the bronze Gable were screaming at people. School administrators worried people wouldn't get it, so after weeks of fighting, they settled on a compromise: (NO) **STALLING**. The statue is also there for his girls and for his grandchildren, so that if they ever need advice when he's dead and gone—he figures he's got 15 years—there will be a piece of him left, forever, reminding them to get off their asses and fight.

A student walks past and doesn't recognize him. Gable looks up at himself, and down at the plaque, which is covered in snow, his carefully chosen message obscured. His face is chapped from the cold. Leaning over, he carefully wipes the snow off with his hand.

THE FIVE-MILE drive from the arena back to Gable's house takes him from the heart of campus into gentle rural hills with clapboard farmhouses and grain silos. It's just him and Kathy now. All four girls have moved out, started lives of their own. In five years, he'll have been retired for as long as he was a head coach.

It's a Sunday afternoon, and he heads down to the basement, which is covered with trinkets from his travels. He loves the two cats, which like to crawl on his legs. Rudy is outside, playing in the woods, but Peekers is by the couch, hacking and dry heaving. The noise stops Gable and he looks down, his face stern.

"Don't puke," he orders.

The cat hacks a few more times, bobbing her head, then vomits all over the carpet. Dan takes a step back, then rushes toward the door.

"Oh, she puked," he says. "Oh god."

He looks up the stairs.

"Kathy!

"Kathy!

"Hey Kathy!"

"What?" she calls.

"Kath! She just puked. It wasn't good puke either."

In the kitchen, Kathy starts laughing, imagining the scene.

"It looks gray," he says.

He is helpless in the face of the sick cat. Fierce showdowns with Peekers seem like a comical use of the authority he built by demanding everything from himself and from athletes who wanted to be like him. Even 16 years after losing the opiate of competition, he's still grasping for something to replace it. One of his girls says he lost confidence in himself when he turned over the program he built, too burned out to continue, his identity too tied to wrestling to ever let it go. "I've had some unbelievable conversations with Kathy Gable that Dan Gable doesn't know about in that f—ing closet right there," says current Iowa coach Tom Brands, sitting in the Iowa wrestling room. He later elaborates: "She just ... it just pains her that he's not content. He needs something to do. He needs to be relevant."

That's why Gable never fully pulled away, even after he left coaching in 1997, making good money on the lecture circuit, keeping an administrative job in the athletic department. From the beginning, he worked to stop the death of wrestling, many programs cut because Title IX required that schools add women's sports, and the scholarship-hogging football teams paid everyone's bills and were untouchable. The fight gave him focus. When asked by Al Gore to appear with him at an Iowa rally, Gable had a single question for the vice president: What is your position on Title IX? (He did not appear at the rally.)

When Gable started lobbying, colleges were losing more wrestling programs each year, down from 146 in 1981-82 to 77 in 2011-12. His work paid off. After years of a slow reduction in the annual losses, the number of D1 programs held steady last season. Every state but one now has high school wrestling, and every state but three has college wrestling. "Saving the sport" became his mantra long ago. Still, most afternoons he found himself drawn to the Iowa wrestling practices, sitting in the bleachers like a fan, offering tips. Year after year, when the room



DECADES AFTER HER DEATH, DAN'S SISTER, DIANE, REMAINS A DAILY PRESENCE IN THE GABLE HOME.

cleared, Gable would change into his gear—he kept locker No. 1—and practice moves on the Takedown Machine, trying to keep intact a world he'd first built as a seventh-grade boy.

His time in the wrestling room, and his quest to make sure the sport survived, helped control the storms he felt inside. Gable's life is governed by justification and guilt, as if he's forever paying off some unseen debt. He doesn't like to eat, for instance, without working out, constantly balancing a ledger in his mind. One day in March, he stared at a bowl of pasta, hungry and stubbornly trying not to eat. He'd skipped the gym and now looked longingly at the noodles.

"I don't deserve it," he said quietly.

May 31, 1964, Waterloo, Iowa

Dan and his parents went to Harpers Ferry, Iowa, on the Mississippi River, to fish. They left his older sister, Diane, at home. She was 19. That night, a local boy raped her and stabbed her to death with one of the Gables' kitchen knives. A neighbor found the body. The family threw away all its knives, not knowing which one had been used. Dan's parents fought, torn apart by the murder. They wanted to sell the house and move, but Dan begged them to stay. Nobody touched Diane's room. Her ghost lived there. At night, Dan heard the fights, the words burrowing into his memory, where they'd remain forever. The drinking escalated. He'd lost his sister, and now his deepest fear was coming true. The family was dying with her, and he would be left alone. One evening, his mother screamed, "I wish I'd raised her a whore!" and that was all Dan could stand. Enough! he thought. He got out of his bed, crossed the hall and climbed into Diane's bed, turning to face the wall. Half an hour later, his parents opened the door, humbled by the courage of their son. He felt the bar of light shining on the bed but stayed still. That night, he didn't sleep a wink. In the morning, he moved his things into Diane's room. The arguments

slowed, then stopped, and his parents focused their attention on Dan, who started his junior wrestling season on a tear. He never lost, and his parents never missed a match. Dan loved the look on their faces when he won. He wrestled with a fury his opponents did not understand.

DIANE REMAINS A daily presence in the Gable home.

Around the corner from Dan's favorite chair, an overstuffed brown recliner, is the big family room. Above the fireplace is Dan's medal. Kathy has already put out Easter decorations, including stuffed bunnies and an Easter tree. But the first thing you see when you walk in, in a prominent place by the door, is an 8-by-10 picture of Diane, smiling and happy, forever a teenager.

"That's my sister," he says.

He's always been a protective parent, never letting his girls stay home alone overnight, even when they were in college, no matter how much they complained. He put hammers in their cars in case they ran off the road into a body of water. Diane's death is a psychic phantom limb, a complicated pain he talks about more each year, even if he still can't articulate how it makes him feel. One afternoon, he shows his collection of oversize black scrapbooks, which live in the same room as his used crutches and a pile of rifles and shotguns.

His mother made the books, collecting mementos from his journey, starting with local papers, rising up to *Sports Illustrated* profiles. Katie and Mack Gable kept everything. His parents saved his weights from high school, which he still uses in the barn. When his mom died in 1994, he found hundreds of letters he'd written in college. The Gables invested so much in their only remaining child that everything touched by Dan took on a talismanic meaning. Later, over beers at a local bar, he tries to remember when the collecting began.

"They were doing it before I died," he says, then catches himself.

He's quiet for a moment.

"Before my sister died," he says, and he changes the subject.

March 28, 1970, Evanston, Illinois

After moving into Diane's room, Gable kept winning. He graduated from high school 64-0, a three-time state champion. He didn't lose as a sophomore at Iowa State, or as a junior. He won 118 times in college, entering his final match undefeated. An unknown opponent from Washington named Larry Owings waited. ABC's Wide World of Sports showed up. Gable lost. The pain of his sister's death had been waiting on a moment of weakness, an opening, and in defeat, he couldn't find the strength that had gotten his family through her passing. He thought he'd let Diane down. He'd let his mom and dad down. When he got home, he avoided his parents. When his mom would get him on the phone, he couldn't talk. His throat closed, and the words refused to come out. Everything unraveled. Katie Gable drove to Ames. She confronted her son and slapped him, hard. Dan turned his focus to the Olympics. He got better, more dangerous. Every day for two years, he tortured himself, refusing surgery for torn cartilage in his knee, scared he would miss out on the Olympics. All else he shoved aside, or pushed back down. Nobody scored on him in Munich, and when he won, he tossed the medal in the bottom of his gym bag. For a brief period, his panicked parents thought it was lost. They didn't understand. For him, the reward wasn't a medal but seeing how winning it made them feel. A family was his reward. Years later, sitting in a Des Moines hotel hot tub, Gable would bring up the Owings loss, which he does about once a day. He tried to describe what it did to him, and to his mom and dad. Finally, choosing his words carefully, he said, "It was like a death in the family."

WHEN THE GABLES finally arrive in Des Moines for the NCAA tournament, 37 days have passed since the IOC decision. "I'm coming here with one thing in mind," Dan says after checking into his suite on the 10th floor of the Savery Hotel, reaching into the closet and thumbing past two Iowa jackets before pulling out one that says USA. In the days ahead, he'll talk to the Iowa



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GABLE FAMILY, GO TO ESPN.COM
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Gable's home sauna is where he seeks relief for his aching joints—and from the IOC's machinations.

state legislature, to groups of fans, to dozens of reporters, using his fame and influence to protect Olympic wrestling. Everyone expects him to lead the fight against the IOC. All his life, Gable has been able to sense other people's hopes, just as he feels other people's pain as if it were his own.

Taking on other people's pain is why he left the sport. *The Des Moines Register's* wrestling beat writer, Andy Hamilton, said that Gable quit coaching, in large part, because he could no longer stomach seeing wrestlers he cared about lose. It sounds like coachspeak and only makes sense once you've watched Gable watch wrestling. In Des Moines, as the tournament gets under way, he starts making noises that sound like an animal's death rattle, a moan that starts somewhere very deep inside.

"Why do I do this to myself?" he says.

He sets his feet far apart and leans down toward the mat. His hands twitch. The Hawkeyes lose match after match. They're not wrestling aggressively, not attacking until the end of the third period, and after yet another defeat, Annie rushes back to Dan and says, "Dad, you gotta start coaching again," an idea that is repeated not much later by a former college wrestler in the suite. "You want me to be dead in about two years?" Gable says. "I got out of it to save my life."

All of his angst coalesces into one brief window of agony, on Day 2, during Matt McDonough's quarterfinal match. A year ago, McDonough dominated people, and now, for some reason, he is wrestling without anger or energy. Upset at the Big Ten tournament, he'd thrown his second-place medal in a trash can and stormed off. Now he is losing again.

"Dad coached McDonough's dad," one of the girls explains.

Generations now have come and gone, and Gable remembers the losers more than the winners. He can rattle off the wrestlers who suffered with him but never got the brief redemption of a championship. He never cheered after one of his own matches, but he'd leap into the air after theirs, and he'd mourn with them after defeats, and sit in a sauna

wearing a coat and tie to help them make weight. He lived and died with his wrestlers. One of them, Chad Zaputil, still haunts him. Zaputil wrestled at 118 and lost three times in the national finals. After the first defeat, he got the Herky the Hawk mascot tattooed on his thigh. After the second, he got another tattoo, over his heart: an angry golden hawk, wings out, talons sharp and ready. Then he got beat a third time, ending his career. Zaputil disappeared. Gable heard the whispers and searched for him, hanging at his house until he saw him go inside. Gable knocked. Zaputil wouldn't answer, so Gable broke down the door.

"Let me see that tattoo," he demanded.

"No," Zaputil said.

Gable ripped Zaputil's shirt off, and what he saw staggered him. The tattoo had been expanded, to show the hawk clawing out a human heart, with blood splattered all down Zaputil's torso.

"It just killed me," Gable says. "I couldn't handle it."

He thought quitting would spare him the pain, but he was wrong. In Des Moines, McDonough is losing, and Dan is in a panic. His family panics with him. Mackie brings her knees up to cover her face, wraps her arms around her knees. Jenni screams. Dan is screaming now too, spittle flying out of his mouth.

"What's he doing?" he yells. "McDonough, get up! What's he doing!?"

"McDONOUGH! GET OUT OF THERE!"

No, he ain't. No, he ain't. That's bullshit. Ohhhhhh. McDonough got beat! NICE JOB, McDONOUGH!"

The arena falls quiet.

"I'm gonna throw up," Mackie says.

Gable can't sleep that night, haunted by McDonough's loss and the losses of every wrestler he's seen in the past few days, even ones from other schools, kids he's never met. It all combines in his chest, a consuming ache.

"I know the pain," he says.

HIS DAUGHTERS HAVE been watching. Not just the past month, or the previous few days, but their whole lives. They've seen the peaks of arrogance and valleys of self-doubt. They've learned a lot about him by having their own kids. If they don't fully understand what pushes him, they know which clues are important. Lately he's been taking the time to understand new things, like the straps and buckles on his grandkids' car seats. He's been more emotional, calling old wrestlers on the phone to tell stories about how it used to be.

These things must mean something. During a lull in the wrestling, the girls and their husbands sit in the suite, trying to connect the stories, explaining how losing the Olympics feels like the beginning of the end to Dan. "If they drop wrestling," son-in-law Danny Olszta says, "he'll feel he failed."

"I feel bad for my dad," Mackie says. "I don't even know how to explain it. This is ... his life. Having that taken away, I don't want to say it's killing him ... You gotta understand, wrestling is what he went to when he recovered from his sister passing away."

Oldest grandson Gable sits in his chair, never taking his eyes off the mats. His patience astounds them, and they're starting to wonder what his future might hold. He's 9, but he can lock into a sporting event for hours and is so disciplined, he cries if he thinks he might be late for school. While he watches, his mom and his aunts crowd around one another.

"I feel like none of us would be here were it not for wrestling," Jenni explains. "After what wrestling did for my dad and his family, after their tragedy. Wrestling saved them from going down a path of destruction."



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Daughters (from left) Molly, Jenni, Annie and Mackie have endured the storm of Gable's career with him.



Jenni thinks the IOC members would change their mind if they came to Iowa. Drive them through the cornfields to this suite in a deafening, packed arena. Meet her family. See what wrestling means out in the middle of the country and in places like it all over the world, where the thin line between survival and extinction is guarded by toughness. Make them understand what Olympic wrestling has meant to her family, to her father and to her sisters, and what it will mean if it is taken from her sons.

"I have these kids," Annie says. "I have this son. I have this new baby son. How can I possibly look at them and tell them they can never become an Olympic champion? It's part of their blood."

"Like their grandpa," Mackie says.

GABLE HAS BEEN watching himself too, looking inward, changing, thinking about his family. This year, for the first time since seventh grade, he hasn't spent at least three or four days a week in a wrestling room. One day, as he walks from the hotel to the arena, he tries to explain why. There's a long pause as he thinks.

"Time to move on," he says.

"Why?"

"I had never seen a sunset," he says, and he's laughing at himself, at how he sounds. The wrestling rooms of his life come back to him, bunkers, dark and hot, without windows or natural light, a lot like a poet's vision of hell. Dan loved them. The Iowa wrestling room was perfect, carefully constructed over decades as a confessional, a place where pain could be traded for absolution. Even when he went on long speaking trips, it remained there, a spiritual home. The idea of the room kept him tethered to something, and he remained its alpha. Then he stopped coming.

"This year," he says, "I was getting pulled in one direction toward the wrestling room, but ..."—he sighs—"... I think my wife, the love for my wife ..."

There's a yawn of silence. Ten seconds pass.

"I got hurt in July," he says.

He hesitates, considering how much to reveal. "Starting a chain saw," he says.

His rotator cuff, long abused, snapped. He felt it immediately, a burn, and when he says "burn," his voice changes, like he's feeling it anew. He couldn't use his arm for two weeks, couldn't crank a boat, couldn't chop wood. Then he reinjured the shoulder—someone tapped him and he swung around, his own motion doing the damage—and doctors told him he couldn't go into the wrestling room. During the heat of summer, when a team is formed, Gable stayed at home, not connected to the Hawkeyes. He liked his time alone, looking out on all he'd built. That surprised him.

The rotator cuff injuries, and an earlier painful fall while hauling in the Christmas tree, had left him hobbled, feeling his age, thinking about the future. He couldn't wrestle, not even on the Takedown Machine. Piece by piece, he'd been stripped of the things that had kept his demons in check since seventh grade, in the gray cinder block dungeon at West High School. First he lost his sister and his perfect record. Then he lost his wrestling career, then his coaching career, then he lost wrestling itself, seeing former opponents fall victim to Title IX and shrinking budgets. He lost his relevance. His girls grew up. He endured eight knee operations and four hip replacements in exchange for whatever relief wrestling brought. Then doctors told him he couldn't wrestle people any longer, and the Christmas tree and the chain saw nearly took away the Takedown Machine, and that is just about that. Some essential part of Gable is gone forever. He'll likely never wrestle again, stripped of the most important part of himself, his ability to keep his pain buried inside.

Now the IOC wants to take away the Olympics.

Gable walks four or five blocks during this conversation, winding above the sidewalks and streets of Des Moines on the skywalk. A guard

checks his ticket and waves him into the suite level. Making the turn down the hall to join his family, he thinks about his useless gear gathering dust in the Iowa wrestling room.

"Maybe it's time to turn my locker in," he says. "It might be."

His words carry many different emotions: surprise, relief, resignation and, just maybe, acceptance.

"They might need it," he says. "I don't want to hold back any progress."

A FEW HOURS before Iowa's final round of the tournament, Gable and two friends find a sauna in a private gym, accessible by an unmarked door and a metal staircase. The temperature rises toward 200. Gable scoops his hand into the water bucket to splash his face. He's been vulnerable, raw after the Olympics fight and the Hawkeyes' collapse. Maybe that's why it hits him now. The memory of his sister comes to him, vividly. He is being pulled backward, toward her death and his complicity in it.

He brings it up on his own, and the story trickles out. Every now and again, he splashes water on his face. His friends look at the floor in silence. The sauna is completely quiet except for Dan's voice, which sounds far away.

It was a Sunday.

They'd driven the block from a rented fishing cabin to a nearby pay phone outside. He sat in the backseat. Nobody answered at the house in Waterloo. Dan remembers his parents feeling antsy. They got a neighbor to go check. He said the door was locked but the television or radio was playing. Mack Gable told the guy to get in the house and call back.

They waited.

Dan remembers the noise the phone made, the metallic, guttural rattle.

"I HAVE THESE KIDS," HIS DAUGHTER ANNIE SAYS. "HOW CAN I POSSIBLY TELL THEM THEY CAN'T BE AN OLYMPIC CHAMPION? IT'S IN THEIR BLOOD."

"Rrrrrring," he says now. "Rrrrrring."
It's hard to breathe in the sauna.

Mack answered and listened as the neighbor described Diane's half-naked body dead on the living room carpet, in the same room where Dan once sat in the window. Katie kept bumping her husband, asking over and over what he was hearing. She studied his face for clues. Mack dropped the phone. It swung back and forth, slowly, back and forth. Back and forth.

Dan sees the phone again. He pictures it now: a swaying receiver connected by a creaking metal cord to a box.

"She's been hurt," Mack said.

"How bad?" Katie asked.

"She's not alive," Mack said.

Dan hears the words again. *She's not alive.* The sweat rolls down his arms.

Katie tore off toward the cabin, with Dan sprinting after her, Mack chasing in the car. When Dan reached the cabin, he found his mother pounding her head on the floor, over and over again.

"Blood on the floor of the four-dollar-a-night cabin" is what he says in the sauna, and his friends don't say a word.

"It's hot," Gable says suddenly. "I'm gonna step outside."

Mike Duroe and Doughty watch him compose himself. Gable returns, ready to continue. His family had started the endless drive across small Iowa roads when Dan said he might know something. Mack swerved off the road, pulling his son from the car. Dan explained that a neighborhood boy named Tom Kyle had been saying aggressive, sexual things about Diane, but Dan thought it was just normal guy talk. He never said anything to anyone. He didn't know. He was just a boy. Mack slapped Dan, hard, across the face, then hugged him. Pain and relief, even then.

"Helped him," Dan says now. "Helped me."

They drove home, and Dan moved into her room, winning 162 straight matches before losing. Some part of Gable never stopped blaming himself for her death.

His story isn't finished.

Tom Kyle went to prison for life. Then two years ago, on the ride home from a fishing trip, Dan's cellphone rang. It was the prison. Kyle, they explained, was dead. Dan looked out his window as he listened and shuddered. He was passing the parking lot where they found out about Diane, where his dad dropped a pay phone that swung slowly on its cord. Kyle's death brought back the sorrow and grief, the anger and guilt, and Gable walked around his 45 acres when he got home, yelling and screaming at the tall pines. He needed to purge these feelings.

"I didn't get it all," he tells his friends, standing outside of the sauna, leaning in, "but I got a lot. Like the Owings loss."

He closes the door and sinks into a chair. *Like the Owings loss.* Something is very close to the surface, and he tries to force it back down. The pain about his sister is combining with all the other pain he's felt in his life, with Larry Owings, with the Olympics, even with McDonough. He struggles with it. This is the price of trying to bury a lifetime of hurt. At some point, each loss stopped being a separate thing, blurring into the ones that came before, until there isn't even such a thing as individual losses, just loss. Every new pain feels like all his pain. Gable is hunched over. His friends wait for him to move. He rises to his feet and raps the sauna door goodbye.

Four hours later, the emotions that started in the sauna force their way out, released by his joy over Derek St. John's national title. Mackie rushes to find Kathy, who comforts him. "I had to get it out of me," he says, still sniffing, wiping away his tears. "A lot of pain. I had to have a win, just to get it out of me."

THEY'RE BACK IN Iowa City. It took all morning to pack the hotel room and load grandkids into the proper vehicles. There'd been drama with Annie, who didn't want to stop and eat together on the way back. It turned into a big fight, tempers flaring, everyone sensitive and exhausted. It's an enormous pain for moms with young children to relocate to a different city every March for a wrestling tournament.

Dan walks through a foot of snow toward the barn, cranking the ATV, the powder blowing over the tires as he accelerates through a clearing in the woods. He pulls up to a small barn with a low ceiling and steps inside to gather wood. The logs are still wet, and the air smells like oak and elm. He's thinking about the recent drama, not sure if he'll be able to get everyone to do it again next year.

"I don't know how long we'll keep up this wrestling stuff," he says.

He steers the vehicle onto a hill where he used to run, pressing the pedal to the floor, kicking up a wake of snow. When he comes to a trail blocked by a failing tree, he turns around, making a note to come back later with a chain saw. This land is a lot of work, and he's getting older. He's got to be careful. Another fall might be more than he can handle. They're thinking about downsizing. Building a small house and selling the big one to Jenni. Next year, for the first time in their lives, Dan and Kathy are spending January and March in Florida, returning to Iowa in February for wrestling events. They've rented a place. The sun will be a relief, easing Dan's aching joints. Here, surrounded by his forest, he has found the strength to finally surrender, which is its own kind of victory. To his left, five deer move through the trees. Snow piles on the branches, two inches at least.

Up ahead in the driveway, he sees his daughter's car running, coughing exhaust smoke. Mackie and Justin are about to leave, making the drive to Dubuque, where she teaches kindergarten and he coaches soccer. The reverse lights are on by the time Gable reaches the car. He leans in and gently kisses her on the forehead. Mackie's car disappears around the bend, leaving behind a red glow and then not even that. Everything is still. The house is empty. He'll know the fate of Olympic wrestling soon enough. His fighting days are nearly finished. Gable goes back inside. All he can do is wait for headlights to shine through the windows, letting him know one of his girls has come back home. ■



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WHAT WOULD VINCE LOMBARDI make of Seattle, which has turned to meditation to nurture the well-being of its players? Or Jacksonville, which has embraced hard-core analytics to find that increasingly elusive edge? Or RG3 and the read-option; or Joe Flacco and the Ravens' new aerial ways; or another certain Lambeau Legend who, by the end of his sixth season as starter, will have thrown the ball more times than Bart Starr did in his 16-year career? Maybe Lombardi would curse up one of his famous storms over a league that's been renovated beyond his recognition. Or maybe not. After all, quitters never win, and winners never fail to install a no-huddle, quintuple-read-option, wild Tebow offense—if it works.



LOTUS POSE ON TWO



NFL YESTERDAY
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PREVIEW

NFL TODAY
Need a hug?

MEDITATION? YOGA? NO YELLING OR SWEARING? **RUSSELL WILSON** AND THE SEAHAWKS BELIEVE THEIR KINDER, GENTLER PHILOSOPHY IS THE FUTURE OF FOOTBALL. WINNING A SUPER BOWL WOULD BE A GOOD WAY TO PROVE IT.

| BY ALYSSA ROENIGK | PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER YANG |



"IT'S DIFFERENT HERE," PETE CARROLL SAYS. "HAVE YOU NOTICED?" IT'S HARD NOT TO. AT 9 A.M. ON THE FIRST SUNDAY OF TRAINING CAMP IN RENTON, WASH., HIGH-PERFORMANCE SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST MIKE GERVAIS, DRESSED IN A NAVY SEAHAWKS HOODIE AND WHITE BASEBALL CAP AND FLASHING MORE ENTHUSIASM THAN IS RATIONAL AT THIS HOUR, WELCOMES PLAYERS INTO A MEETING ROOM AT THE VIRGINIA MASON ATHLETIC CENTER. THIS PLACE USED TO BE THE SITE

of a coal tar refinery; now it's the happiest, greenest campsite in the history of the NFL. Gervais is about to lead a meditation session and, as he always does, instructs the players to hit record on their phone voice-recorder apps and to close their eyes. Then he starts guiding them: "Quiet your minds," "Focus your attention inwardly" and "Visualize success."

This is the Pete Carroll experience we always hear about. After flaming out as an NFL head coach, Carroll rebuilt his rep as an ultracom-

petitive buddy coach at USC. But beneath the perpetual smile was a guy who thought, more than anything, there was a better way to win. Meditation is only part of it. After Carroll was fired by the Patriots following the 1999 season, he agonized over what he'd do differently if he landed another NFL head-coaching job. Almost every day for the better part of a decade, while leading Southern Cal to seven top-10 finishes and one BCS title, he jotted down do-over notes. His dream was to fundamentally change the way players are coached. The timeworn strategy is, of course, to be a hard-ass—think Bear Bryant banning water breaks, Vince Lombardi screaming and yelling, Mike Rice throwing basketballs at players' heads, Nick Saban berating his team on the sideline. Carroll craved a chance to reimagine the coaching role in the NFL. "I wanted to find out if we went to the NFL and really took care of guys, really cared about each and every individual, what would happen?"



Bordering Lake Washington, with a DJ spinning music and coach Carroll peeking into every play, Seahawks camp has become a hot ticket. Seattle routinely sells out training camp sessions.



Now, three and a half years into his tenure with the Seahawks—with a 91-man roster that includes only four players who have been with the team longer—he can truly start to answer that question.

On this Sunday morning, it starts with meditation with Gervais, whom Carroll began to integrate into the program in 2011, at first working on the fringes as a consultant, then becoming a sideline regular last year. For the newcomers to his sessions, Gervais keeps them short, about six minutes. For those with some experience, he prepares longer, more individualized meditations. No one is required to be here, yet about 20 players show up at various times every week to breathe in, breathe out and open their minds. The entire roster also participates in yoga class, which players enjoyed so much last year as an optional activity that the staff decided to make it a mandated part of player workouts this year.

The big idea is that happy players make for

better players. Everyone in the facility, from coaches and players to personal assistants and valets, is expected to follow Carroll's mantras regarding positivity of thought, words and actions. "Do your job better than it has ever been done before," he tells them. Yelling and swearing are frowned upon, and every media interview with a player or coach ends with a thank-you to the reporter. And in a trial program entering its second year, a group of 15 to 20 players is undergoing Neurotopia brain-performance testing and has worked with Gervais to create status profiles—updated every week on an iPad app—of what's going on in their lives, how much sleep they're getting, their goals and how they're dealing with stressors.

Even as we re-examine the mental health of players in this kinder, gentler era of the sport, this is a bizarre football world. It certainly helps that Carroll has found a kindred spirit and advocate in second-year star QB Russell Wilson, who schedules individual weekly sessions with Gervais. "We do imagery work and talk about having that innovative mindset of being special," Wilson says. "We talk about being in the moment and increasing chaos throughout practice, so when I go into the game, everything is relaxed."

Then he repeats what Carroll says all the time, what everyone around here says: "I talk to guys on other teams, and other teams aren't like this. We do stuff different here."

AT THE NFL Rookie Symposium in June, Chris Ballard steps to the podium. Ballard, the

director of player personnel for the Chiefs, has a harsh message for the recent draft picks. "Most of you will not be in this league three years from now," he begins. Later, he adds, "Nobody cares about your problems. The fans don't care. The media doesn't care. And ownership doesn't care. They care about results."

These words are spoken seven months after a Kansas City player, Jovan Belcher, shot his girlfriend nine times, then drove to the team facility and killed himself in the parking lot. But in what remains a suck-it-up NFL culture, that speech could have been delivered by almost anybody in the league.

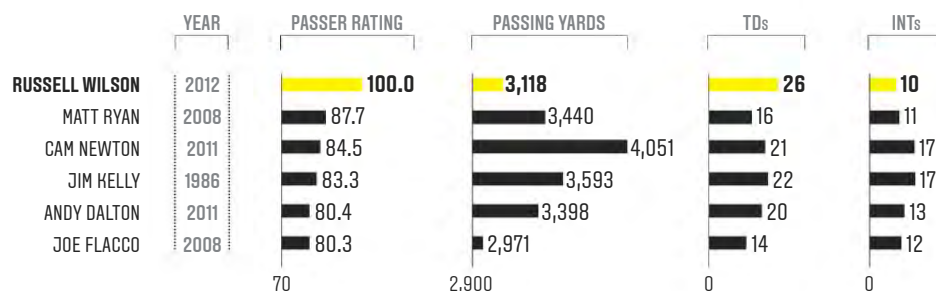
"He was treating them exactly how they feel, like objects," says Jimmy Stewart, a licensed family therapist who works with athletes and military personnel dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. Stewart is a former defensive back with the Saints and Lions, and when he left the league in 1980 he was an emotional wreck and an alcoholic. "The four years I played pro football were some of the most horrendous of my life," he says. "I cried alone. I was frightened. I badly needed somebody to talk to, and I know so many guys today who feel the same way."

After retiring, Stewart earned a master's degree in counseling and went on a crusade to improve the mental health of athletes. In the past few years, he has lobbied the NFL and several teams, including the Chiefs and Saints, to embed psychologists within their coaching staffs, similar to what the military does. He says that his calls largely go unreturned and that



HEAD OF THE CLASS

Since the advent of the 16-game schedule, only six rookie QBs have started every game and finished with a passer rating of 80 or higher. And nobody has come close to Russell Wilson's performance.



even when teams do call him back, he is often met with arrogance and a “we’re doing enough” attitude. So when Stewart hears details of what’s happening in Seattle, he begins to cry.

“Talking about concussions is important, but players are not committing suicide just because they have CTE,” he says. “They are committing suicide because they refuse to be vulnerable. CTE can cause symptoms of depression, but it’s isolation and invulnerability that causes you to commit suicide. With Belcher, the only way you have a chance with him is if every day you have a coach and a psychologist asking, ‘How are you feeling today?’”

In Seattle, there’s an entire staff expressly designed to look out for players. It’s headed by Sam Ramsden, the team’s longtime trainer who’s now the Seahawks’ director of player health and performance. The staff also includes Maurice “Mo” Kelly, the director of player development, who acts as a liaison between players and management; Dirk Eldredge, a life skills consultant/addiction counselor, who helps players transition to the NFL and prepare for when they leave the game; and Gervais. By Carroll’s orders, rookies receive special attention to help them assimilate.

“It hit me that in our days at USC, many of our players were drafted high, but a lot of them didn’t do very well in the league,” Carroll says. “They would come back to visit campus and say: ‘It’s hard-core. You don’t know anybody. You go home and you’re by yourself. You don’t feel connected at all.’ We had reached guys at a different level that allowed them to perform at a high level. And when they left us, they didn’t have the support to carry them through.”

All Seahawks players are encouraged to use the support staff the way employees in the business world rely on a human resources department. Depressed? Worried about a loved one? Sick pet? The staff wants to hear about it. And if a player is dragging at practice, a coach will be proactive and ask why—instead of

jumping to conclusions and berating him in front of his teammates. That includes assistant head coach Tom Cable, the former hothead coach of the Raiders. “I always coached how my coaches coached me,” he says. Working alongside Carroll, 48-year-old Cable says he finally feels as though he’s working with players the right way. “If I go ballistic on a guy because he dropped his outside hand or missed an underneath stunt, who is wrong? I am,” Cable says. “I’m attacking his self-confidence and he’s learning that if he screws up, he’s going to get yelled at. If you make a mistake here, it’s going to get fixed.”

One way or another. Last year Ramsden started screening struggling players’ blood panels, looking for deficiencies in certain amino acids that act as important indicators of whether a person lacks sufficient levels of dopamine and serotonin. He’s looking for why players get into a funk, not just how to shake them out of it.

If a physical solution isn’t found, Ramsden, Gervais or another staff member talks players through their problems. And Carroll has empowered his team leaders to reach out to players who might not connect with a 62-year-old white surfer dude. “Coach Carroll listens to his players,” says veteran running back Michael Robinson. “But you need the right mix of older guys who get it. Pete can’t be in the locker room all the time, and the head man won’t resonate with everybody.”

Make no mistake, it’s not hard to find detractors. QB Matt Flynn, Seattle’s big free agent signee a year ago, criticized Carroll’s style on his way out the door for Oakland this spring. “The way I look at it, leadership and being that guy is: Don’t be someone you’re not. Don’t be a hoorah guy jumping around and clapping your hands if you’re not that guy,” Flynn told the *Los Angeles Times*. “Makes you look desperate. Makes you look silly. That’s not me.”

Critics in the league also point out that the

concepts of “new age” and “PED abusers” don’t exactly mesh. Since 2010, Seattle has had a league-high five failed drug tests, and that doesn’t even include Richard Sherman, whose suspension was overturned on appeal. Most of the positives reportedly were for Adderall use, although as Jim Harbaugh, coach of the division-rival 49ers, pointed out in June, the NFL is prohibited from commenting on the nature of the flunked tests. “You’re taking somebody at their word that I don’t know if you can take them at their word, understanding the circumstances,” Harbaugh said.

The most recent suspension came in May, when second-year pass rusher Bruce Irvin tested positive, reportedly for Adderall, and received a four-game ban. Carroll met with Irvin, then with Robinson, who called a team meeting and challenged his teammates to hold themselves accountable not only to coaches and league rules but to one another. “The fact that that happened to Bruce is a gift for the next guy,” Carroll says. “He made a poor choice and got hammered by it so the next guy won’t have to go through that.”

THE EVOLUTION OF the Seahawks began on Jan. 11, 2010, the day Pete Carroll brought his sunny disposition to rainy Seattle. When asked to encapsulate his life philosophy, he answers with two words, the same ones that hang on a banner above the practice field: “Always compete.”

To implement that philosophy in Seattle, Carroll knew he needed the perfect partner. From a stack of GM candidates, Carroll zeroed in on John Schneider, who, although only 38 at the time, had already built a reputation around the league as a scrappy, relentless, outside-the-box thinker as the director of football operations for the Packers. When Schneider was a junior at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, he wrote an impassioned letter to Packers GM Ron Wolf explaining why he’d

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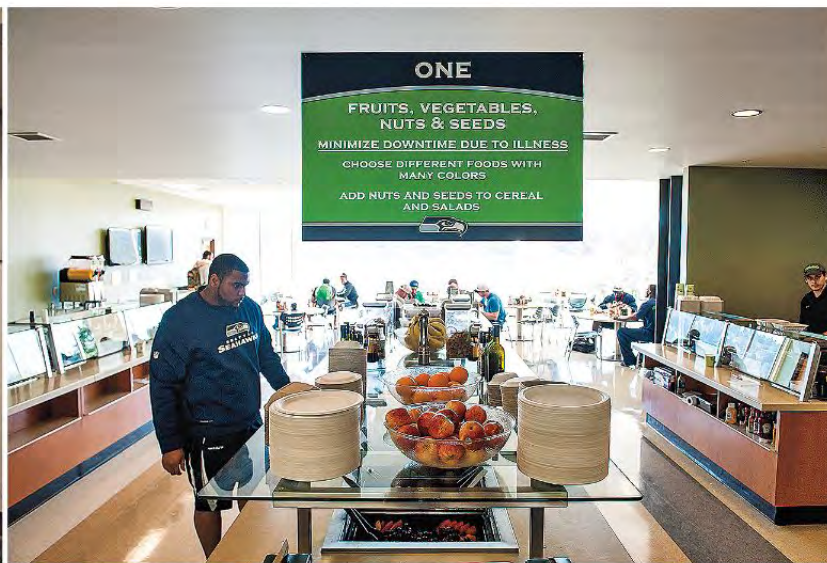
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The Seahawks seem to have thought of everything in designing a facility and training program that cater to a player's every need, from top-notch nutrition to an on-site barber.

make a great scout. An intrigued Wolf brought him on as an intern that summer in 1992, and Schneider has been working in the league ever since. Says Carroll of their partnership, "I was going to make this a great relationship, a famous relationship of cooperation and coordination."

In their first four months together, before their families joined them in Seattle, the two men "brothered up," as Carroll calls it. They slept on their office couches, pored over the roster and folders of draft prospects, and shared control of the stereo. In the early days, they worked to the Grateful Dead; as the draft neared, they ditched the Dead for the Doors.

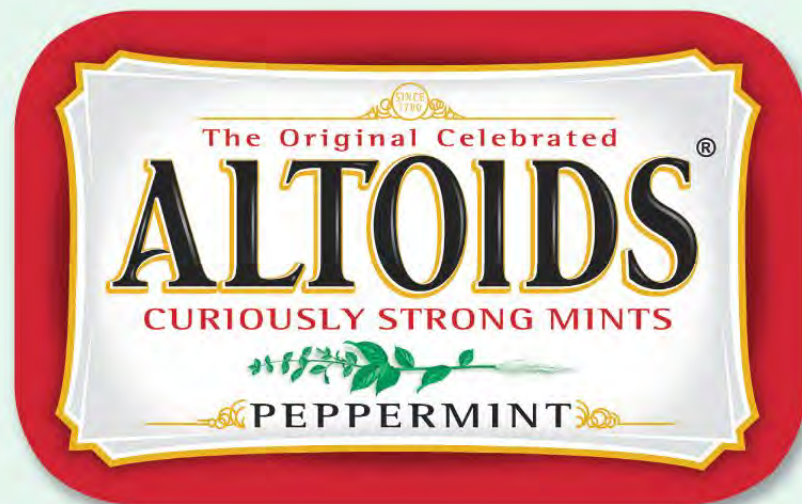
They needed that time together to execute a radical roster overhaul—more than 200 player

moves that first year and more than 500 by the end of 2011. Carroll and Schneider wanted guys who truly bought in, and they weren't interested in begging for converts. On the first day of meetings in 2010, Carroll asked players to stand up and choose a new seat, to take a fresh perspective as they started a new season. "One guy in the back of the auditorium didn't switch seats," says Matt Hasselbeck, the Seahawks' starting quarterback that year. "He was a big-money guy, a starter. And he was gone a week later. Pete didn't care about the seats. He just wants to know who's with him." Another time during that first camp, Carroll turned off the facility's air conditioning because he wanted to see who would complain about the heat. The coach does not like whining. In fact, it's Rule 2 of his three decrees: 1. Protect the team; 2. No whining, no complaining, no excuses; 3. Be early.

Carroll's group prides itself on finding positive players, and that is never more evident

than in the team's draft preparation. Carroll, Schneider and the scouting department look at the same physical traits every other team evaluates, but they might value interview sessions more than any other team in the league. They pay close attention to a potential draft pick's word choices and any negative language or finger-pointing. They want to hear accountability and optimism. Before the 2010 draft, Seattle was in the market for a franchise left tackle in a draft deep with left tackles. But among Trent Williams, Russell Okung, Anthony Davis and Bryan Bulaga, Okung was the guy who stood out to Schneider and Carroll. How did they ultimately decide he was worth the No. 6 pick and a \$48 million investment? By taking him bowling and watching him roll a woeful 63. Okung played hard, and when Schneider rolled the exact same score, Okung smiled and asked for a rematch. He was a living, breathing gutter-ball-rolling embodiment of the personality blend of

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upbeat and fiercely competitive that the Seahawks wanted to draft.

It's also no coincidence that Wilson, the 75th pick in the 2012 draft, is a Seahawk. After all, he has a track record of setting and reaching goals. In 2011, after graduating from NC State, Wilson decided he wanted to spend his last year of eligibility playing for Wisconsin. So he faxed a letter to then-Badgers coach Bret Bielema stating that he wanted to come to Madison, win a Big Ten title, be the conference QB of the year and go to the Rose Bowl. Bielema was impressed by the QB's resolve, welcomed Wilson and then watched as the fifth-year senior checked off every item.

After being drafted by the Seahawks in the third round last year, Wilson told Carroll, "I can be the starting quarterback on this team." The QB also gave a new list of goals to the Seattle coaches and hung a copy in his locker. His list ranges from daily objectives ("Always believe in myself") to what he calls his legendary goals ("Win multiple Super Bowls"). And this was compiled *before* he was named Seattle's starting quarterback. Says Wilson: "I truly believe in positive synergy, that your positive mindset gives you a more hopeful outlook, and belief that you can do something great means you will do something great. I believed that before I got here, and the crazy thing is, Coach Carroll and our football team believe it too."

On Day 1 of minicamp in Renton, Carroll pulls on receiver gloves and throws with an equipment manager as Macklemore thumps through overhead speakers, courtesy of the team DJ. Once practice starts, Carroll rarely stops moving, disappearing into huddles and racing across the field to high-five a defensive back for breaking up a pass. Gervais wanders the sideline much the way he does on Sundays during the season, stopping to chat with whoever walks his way. Intense offensive line drills end with combatants pulling each other up: "Stay positive," players say to each other. "Put yourself into a mindset of greatness." A touchdown catch brings hoots and hollers from the sidelines, as if the Seahawks had just won a Super Bowl.

Reality sets in after practice. Reporters confront players with questions about Irvin's suspension and Harbaugh's comments on



PEDs. "We just want to keep it positive—always," says cornerback Walter Thurmond. Adds receiver Doug Baldwin, "Our prefrontal cortex doesn't reach maturity until age 25."

Later that afternoon, Carroll lights up when informed of Baldwin's unusual answer. "That is when your brain develops and you take a step forward in maturity," he says. "Him telling you guys that—that's a look into our relationship."

HERE'S THE THING about the Seattle experiment: It's only the beginning of what the Seahawks intend to be a total revamp of the way a football franchise approaches the physical and mental well-being of everyone in the organization. Team chef Mac McNabb feeds the players fruits and vegetables from local organic farms. He takes any leftovers to a nearby family-run farm to feed free-range chickens, which are raised specifically for the Seahawks cafeteria. Ramsden and Gervais spend their spare time attending conferences, meeting with nutritionists and sleep experts, and, judging by the mound of boxes in Ramsden's office, buying any new tech gadget that could be the next breakthrough in maximizing athletic performance. At the start of last season, Ramsden gathered data on most of the Seahawks, including blood and vision analyses and sleep and conditioning profiles. At practice, player movement is tracked via GPS so the team can monitor workloads. Ultimately, Ramsden would like to have players and coaches wear wristbands to track sleep habits and, when necessary, adjust practice schedules to maximize rest. (Can you imagine Bill Belichick sending everybody home from practice

early to catch up on shut-eye?)

The Seahawks hope to one day have daily mental health check-ins to monitor players' off-the-field problems. Owner Paul Allen, no stranger to innovation, has indicated that he wants his MLS franchise, the Seattle Sounders, to follow the Seahawks' model.

For now, though, the next step is getting everybody on the meditation bandwagon. "Meditation is as important as lifting weights and being out here on the field for practice," Okung says. "It's about quieting your mind and getting into certain states where everything outside of you doesn't matter in that moment. There are so many things telling you that you can't do something, but you take those thoughts captive, take power over them and change them."

After last year's crushing playoff loss to the Falcons, Wilson did just that. Walking off the field alongside his teammates, he felt the darkness creeping in as he entered the stadium tunnel. Then he stopped for a moment and closed his eyes. Instead of fixating on what could have been in the 30-28 defeat, he began to visualize what could be. "We have a bright, bright future," Wilson thought in the belly of the Georgia Dome. "The Seahawks can be special for a long time."

On the team bus, he made a beeline for Carroll, unable to keep his vision to himself. Then he paused for a second, not wanting his optimism to be confused with a lack of accountability for the loss. He began slowly before Carroll cut him off. "Man, that's just what I was thinking," the coach said. "Let's not just win one Super Bowl. Let's win multiple." ■

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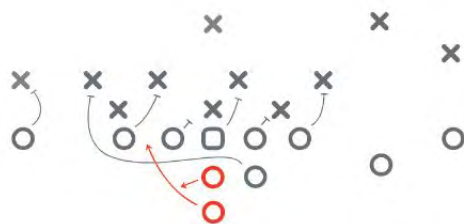
LEARN TO READ LIKE RG!!!

In case you need a refresher, we had Scouts Inc. founder **GARY HORTON** draw up all the ways Robert Griffin III and the read-option keep D-coordinators up all night.



INSIDE HANDOFF

The primary goal of the read-option is to give RG3 enough time and space to ride the RB into the mesh point, where he can either hand off or keep based on how the edge defender reacts. Here, the O-line blocks opposite, disguising this as an off-tackle run. But RG3 and RB Alfred Morris follow the pulling tight end/H-back to the back side; the D is forced to play contain, not allowing RG3 the edge. That opens an inside hole for Morris, who had 324 yards on option runs last season, third most in the NFL.

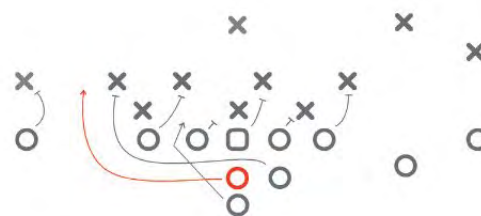


DEFENSIVE COUNTER

The defensive end or outside linebacker has to crash inside to plug the hole, while the rest of the D maintains its lanes and gap discipline. But choosing to take Morris out of the play is a gamble because the ball stays in the hands of Griffin.

QB KEEPER

Griffin called his own number 35 times for 17 first downs on zone-read rushes in 2012, more than any other player in the league not named Alfred [51 carries, 17 first downs]. So when the edge defender, here an outside linebacker, opts to crash down on Morris, RG3 pulls the ball from his RB's belly and cuts outside, where the tight end has already sealed the edge. The receiver lined up wide kicks out the corner, and Griffin now has two lead blockers on two defenders in the open field.



DEFENSIVE COUNTER

The outside linebacker should stay home to set the edge against RG3, and the inside linebackers must fill gaps to contain Morris. Once the D starts doing this consistently, it's time for the Skins to multiply their options.

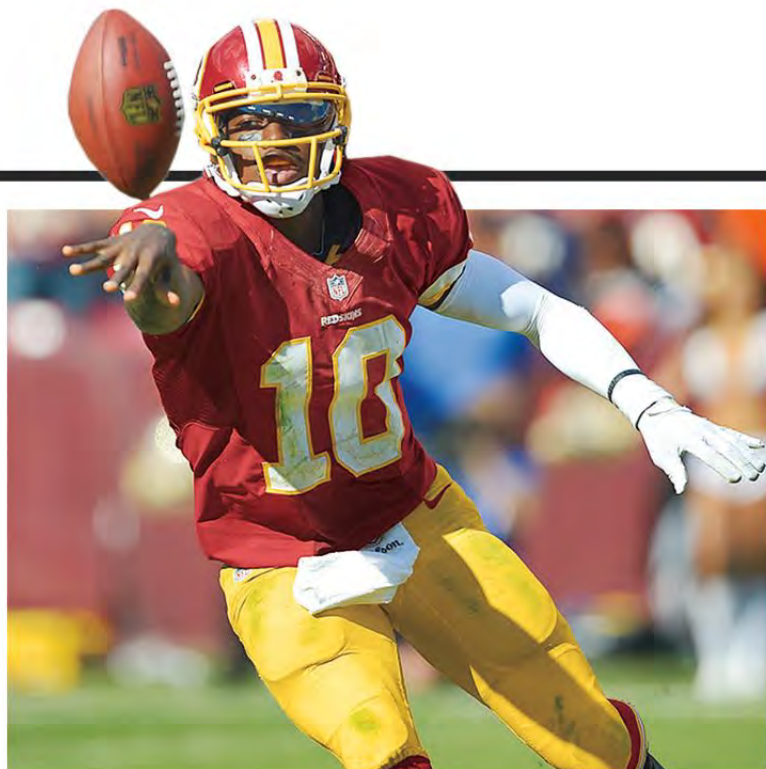


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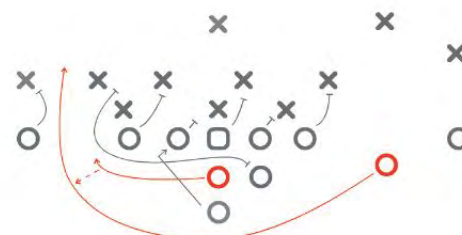


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FULL READ-OPTION

Once Washington has had success with the basic read-option and the D is keying on RG3 and Morris, the Redskins are ready to add another wrinkle: the pitch. This variation is called in the huddle, not at the line of scrimmage; Griffin sets a receiver in motion, and the play starts with an inside-zone-blocking look to the right, but Griffin, Morris and the receiver move the opposite way. The outside linebacker now has three options to worry about: Does he crash inside to stop the run, stay at home to contain RG3 or slide outside for the potential pitch?



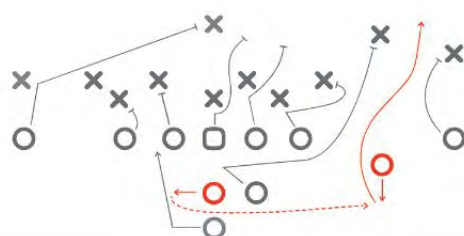
DEFENSIVE COUNTER

No easy reads here. The D must have a player assigned to both RG3 and the pitch man; both will be in space with no help, so they have to stay smart and not freelance. At the same time, the D-line must maintain gap discipline and not allow Griffin to hand off to Morris for an inside run.



PLAY-ACTION SCREEN PASS

Like the full read-option, the screen pass opens up once the Skins have proved they can break off huge gains with the inside handoff or QB keeper. Now the defense is expecting run, and the offensive line shows a zone-run look to the left. But RG3 pulls the ball out of Morris' belly and turns back across field to his wide-open slot receiver, who has an offensive lineman, tight end and receiver paving the way. This entire O-line unit is supremely athletic and can get to the second level as quickly as any in the league, which is imperative to screen success.



DEFENSIVE COUNTER

The linemen must stay in their gaps and slow the O-line from getting to the second level. Meanwhile, the back seven must close quickly and wrap up so the WR doesn't gain yards after the catch.

PLAY-ACTION SLANT PASS

The difficulty for the D on all of these options is that the Skins make each one appear to be the same play. A defender is forced to second-guess everything he's been taught when the line blocks right and the play moves left, and vice versa. Similar to the screen, the slant is another low-risk pass that has been very effective for the Redskins. Here, RG3 rides Morris on an inside-handoff look, and the linebackers bite and step up in support, giving Griffin a large throwing window underneath the safeties. RG3 led the NFL in play-action passing, going 38-of-57 for 636 yards and three TDs. [Ryan Fitzpatrick was second with just 11 attempts.]



DEFENSIVE COUNTER

When [or if] the linemen read play-action, they must get their hands up. But most crucial, the linebackers can't be caught close to the line, leaving a huge hole in coverage. Easier read than done.



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AND THE SERVER SAYS ...

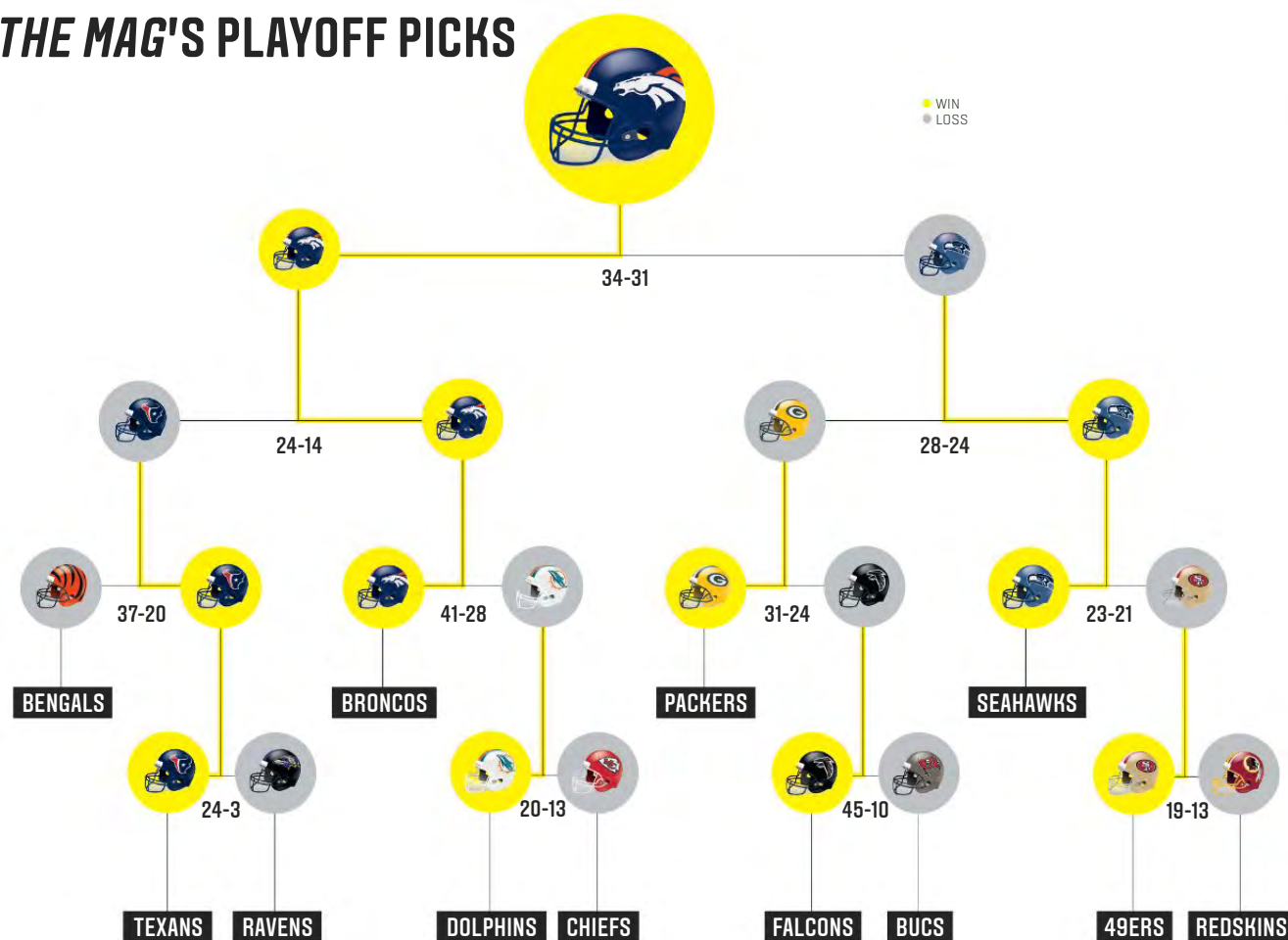
This time of year, everyone has a theory—about the players who'll matter the most, the games that'll go to the wire and the team that'll exit New Jersey with the Lombardi trophy. You can have your hunches; we'll take analytics every time. So we turned to some of the NFL's smartest statheads. Football Outsiders mined its 22 seasons of data to forecast each team's offensive and defensive performance. Pro-Football Reference used its Approximate Value metric to highlight a non-QB MVP, while our resident Football Scientist, KC Joyner, studied the bad decisions of each signal-caller. Finally, Pro Football Focus performed its algorithmic gymnastics to **predict the scores of all 256 regular-season games and our playoff bracket**. The only theory left to test: Does champagne taste sweeter at Mile High or the Meadowlands?



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THE MAG'S PLAYOFF PICKS



GLOSSARY

DVOA (DEFENSE-ADJUSTED VALUE OVER AVERAGE)

Breaks down the season play-by-play, comparing success to the league average based on variables including down, distance, location on the field, current score gap, quarter and opponent quality.

AV (APPROXIMATE VALUE)

The approximate measure of a player's value, calculated by using metrics like games started, Pro Bowls, All-Pros and other stats when applicable.

BDR (BAD DECISION RATE)

The rate at which a QB makes a mental error that leads to a turnover opportunity for the D.

INT CONVERSION RATE

The rate at which a quarterback's INT opportunities—passes that reach the catching frame of a defender—are actually picked off.

ADJUSTED LINE YARDS

Measures runs at specific distances to calculate blocking rather than what the RB does in the open field. Adjusted for situation and opponent.

ADJUSTED GAMES LOST

Measures the cost of injuries, of missed games and of games in which players were unable to play to their full potential.

POWER SUCCESS RATE

The percentage of runs on third or fourth down, with two yards or less to go, that achieve a first down/TD.



PREVIEW

AFC EAST

MIAMI DOLPHINS

SURPRISE! THE PATRIOTS GET CAUGHT IN MIAMI'S WAKE.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

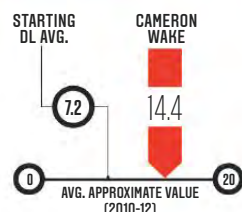
OFFENSE
27

DEFENSE
6

WR Mike Wallace must recover from a poor 2012 (78th in DVOA; first and eighth in 2010 and 2011, respectively), but the offense's big question is whether the line, minus All-Pro Jake Long, can keep Ryan Tannehill upright. Dion Jordan joins a D-line that must be stellar again (42 sacks, seventh in NFL) to ease in CBs Brent Grimes (free agent signee) and Richard Marshall (returning from injury).

NON-QB MVP

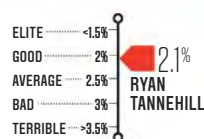
by Pro-Football Reference



Cameron Wake has easily been Miami's best player since 2010. His 15-sack, 18-AV performance a season ago ranked among the most productive in football, and only J.J. Watt recorded more QB hits.

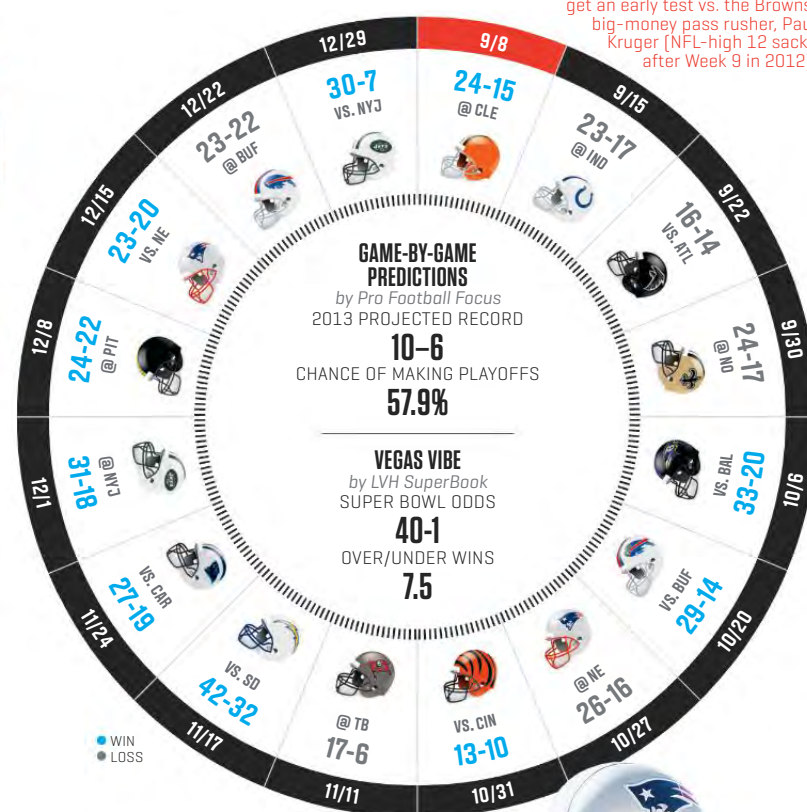
BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner

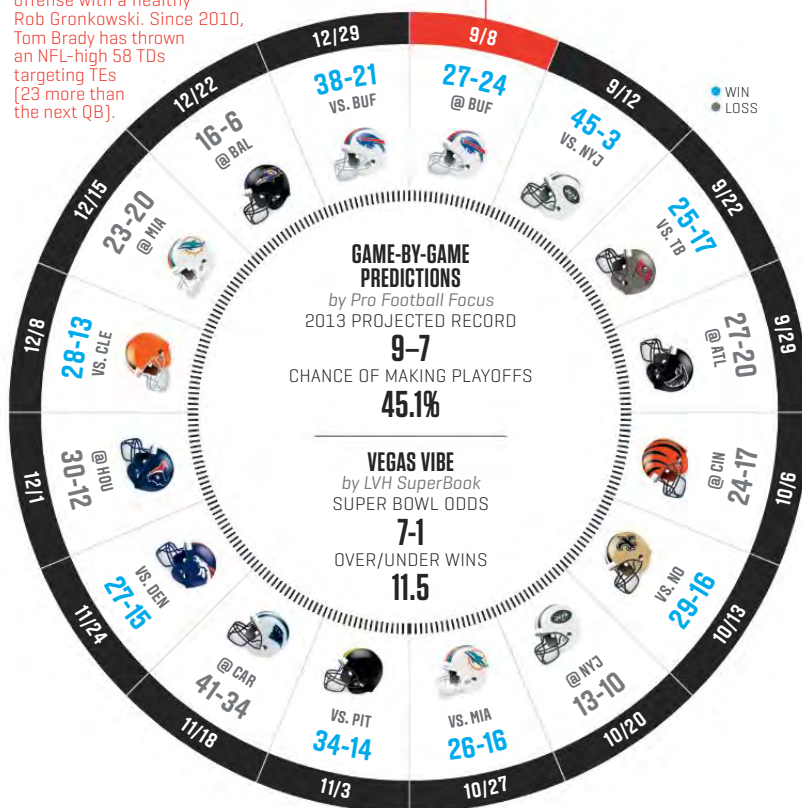


Tannehill (2.1% BDR in 2012) is one of the NFL's most risk-averse deep passers; he threw only one stretch vertical INT. That should continue with a capable No. 1 WR (Wallace) alongside Brian Hartline.

A NEW YEAR Entering his first full season as Miami's starting LT, Jonathan Martin will get an early test vs. the Browns' big-money pass rusher, Paul Kruger (NFL-high 12 sacks after Week 9 in 2012).



A NEW YEAR This is a different offense with a healthy Rob Gronkowski. Since 2010, Tom Brady has thrown an NFL-high 58 TDs targeting TEs (23 more than the next QB).



AFC EAST

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

SUPER BOWL? WORRY ABOUT MAKING THE PLAYOFFS FIRST.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

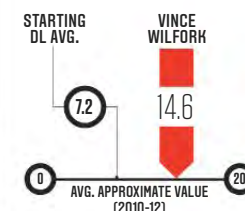
OFFENSE
2

DEFENSE
20

Tom Brady can overcome the loss of 75% of his pass-catching production from 2012, but his numbers will surely take a hit if TE Rob Gronkowski misses serious time. According to DVOA, Gronkowski's three seasons all rank among the 10 best for tight ends since 1991. Further development by DE Chandler Jones (6 sacks as a rookie) will go a long way toward improving the D's consistency.

NON-QB MVP

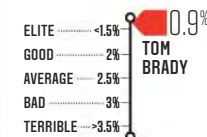
by Pro-Football Reference



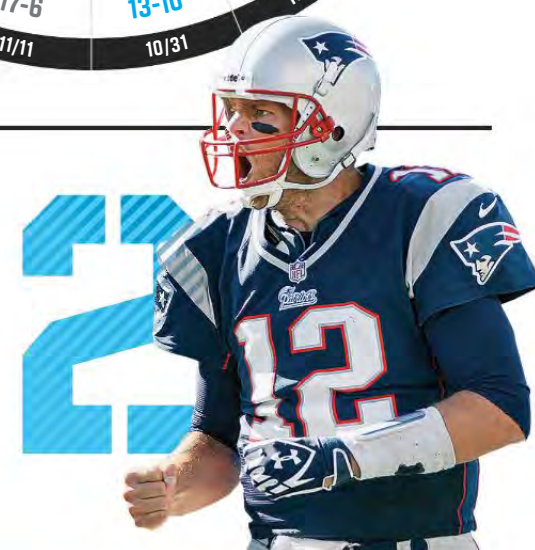
Wilfork is the biggest reason NE's D-line allowed the league's fourth-lowest rate of adjusted line yards on runs up the middle. Runs ended by Wilfork himself in 2012 averaged a scant 1.3 ypc.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



With four sub-1% BDR seasons since 2005 (0.9% in 2012), Brady is the NFL's most pristine passer. But last season he was also the luckiest: No other QB threw 400-plus passes without a bad decision INT.



A GROUNDBREAKER'S GUIDE TO BREAKING NEW GROUND ★ No. 3

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PREVIEW

AFC EAST

BUFFALO BILLS

THE PLAYOFFS ARE STILL A YEAR AWAY FOR THE NEW-LOOK BILLS.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

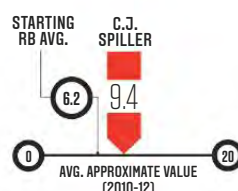
OFFENSE 21 DEFENSE 13

A new coach, a talented rookie QB and an explosive run game [138.6 ypg in 2012, sixth in NFL] spell—maybe, just maybe—the beginning of a competent offense in Buffalo. New defensive coordinator Mike Pettine brings schematic diversity, but he needs \$100 million DE Mario Williams and the rest of the well-paid, much-hyped defensive line to hold up their end of the “bargain” after a lackluster 2012 [24th in adjusted line yards].

NON-QB MVP

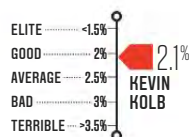
by Pro-Football Reference

Even with the NFL's ninth-worst passing game, Buffalo's offense was only slightly below average in 2012 (minus-4.3% DVOA), which is a credit to **C.J. Spiller**, who led all qualified RBs in yards per touch [6.8] in 2012.

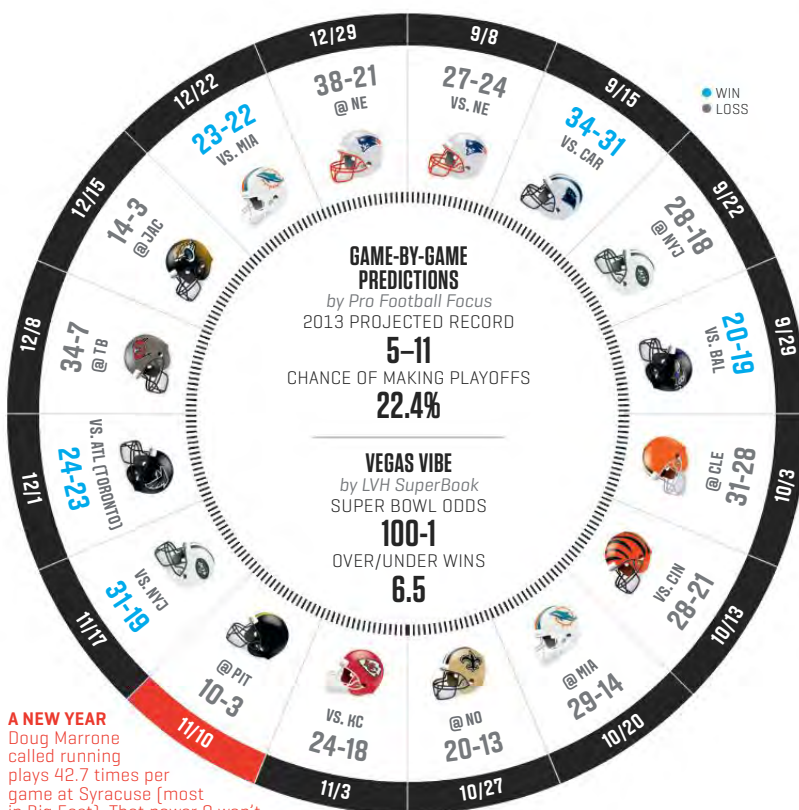


BAD DECISION RATE

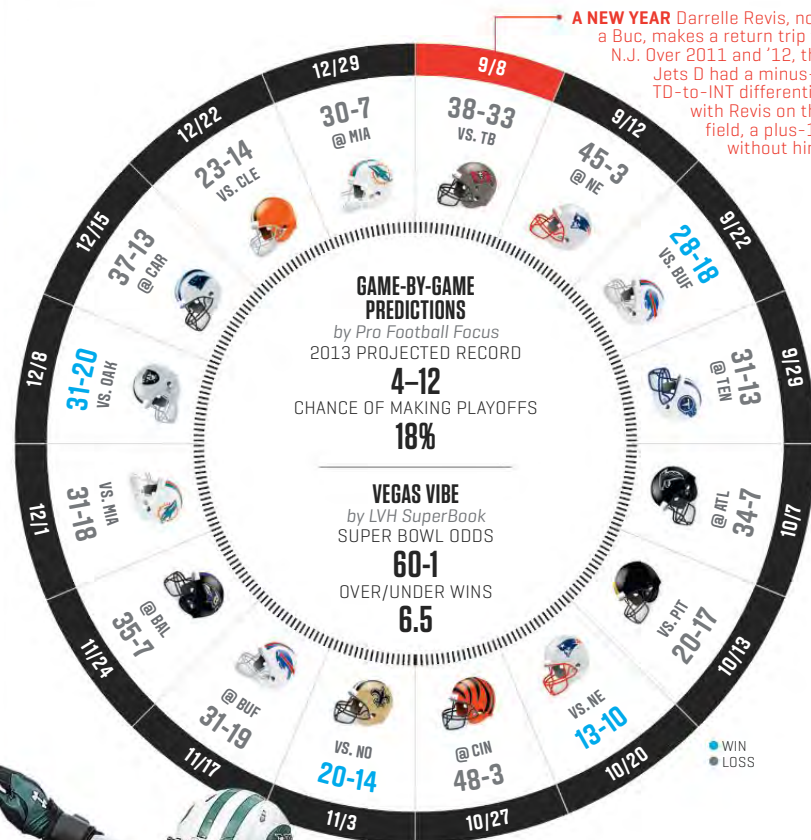
by KC Joyner



If Kolb [2.1% BDR in 2012] wins the job over EJ Manuel, it'll be because coach Doug Marrone trusts his decision-making. Before he got hurt, Kolb was on pace for a career-low 1.6% INT rate.



A NEW YEAR Doug Marrone called running plays 42.7 times per game at Syracuse [most in Big East]. That power O won't fly vs. Pittsburgh, which allowed 3.7 ypc in 2012 [fourth in NFL].



A NEW YEAR Darrelle Revis, now a Buc, makes a return trip to N.J. Over 2011 and '12, the Jets D had a minus-8 TD-to-INT differential with Revis on the field, a plus-13 without him.



AFC EAST

NEW YORK JETS

IT CAN'T GET ANY WORSE THAN LAST YEAR ... RIGHT?

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

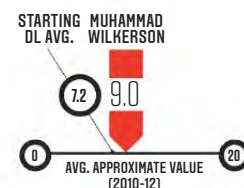
OFFENSE 25 DEFENSE 5

How will the return of a Rex Ryan-quality defense help the offense? Well, from 2009 to '11, when the Jets defense never ranked outside of our top five, a Sanchez-led attack finished 22nd, 16th and 21st in DVOA. It won't quite rise to that level of mediocrity, but RB Chris Ivory, 5.1 ypc in three seasons with the Saints, should help the offense rebound ever so slightly from its putrid No. 30 DVOA rank in 2012.

NON-QB MVP

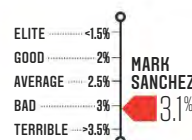
by Pro-Football Reference

Since 2011, the 23-year-old **Muhammad Wilkerson** has racked up 8 sacks, 73 tackles and 18 AV points—numbers that compare with those of Mario Williams and Dwight Freeney at that age.



BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Sanchez's 3.1% BDR was awful, but his luck was even worse—54.5% of his potential INTs resulted in picks, third worst in the NFL. Sanchez is unlucky again: He faces my toughest collection of pass D's in 2013.



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So if you're like millions of men who have some degree of erectile dysfunction (ED), talk to your doctor. Ask about VIAGRA (*sildenafil citrate*), and see if America's most prescribed ED treatment is right for you. 20 million men already have.

For more information go to viagra.com or call 1-888-484-2472 (1-888-4VIAGRA).

THIS IS THE AGE OF TAKING ACTION. VIAGRA.

VIAGRA is prescription medication to treat erectile dysfunction (ED).

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION BELOW.

Do not take VIAGRA if you take nitrates, often prescribed for chest pain, as this may cause a sudden, unsafe drop in blood pressure.

Discuss your general health status with your doctor to ensure that you are healthy enough to engage in sexual activity. If you experience chest pain, nausea, or any other discomforts during sex, seek immediate medical help.

In the rare event of an erection lasting more than 4 hours, seek immediate medical help to avoid long-term injury.

If you are older than age 65, or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg) of VIAGRA. If you are taking protease inhibitors, such as for the treatment of HIV, your doctor may recommend a 25-mg dose and may limit you to a maximum single dose of 25 mg of VIAGRA in a 48-hour period. If you have prostate problems or high blood pressure for which you take medicines called alpha blockers, your doctor may start you on a lower dose of VIAGRA.

In rare instances, men taking PDE5 inhibitors (oral erectile dysfunction medicines, including VIAGRA) reported a sudden decrease or loss of vision or hearing. If you experience sudden decrease or loss of vision or hearing, stop taking PDE5 inhibitors, including VIAGRA, and call a doctor right away.

VIAGRA should not be used with other ED treatments. VIAGRA should not be used with REVATIO or other products containing sildenafil.

VIAGRA does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, facial flushing, and upset stomach. Less commonly, bluish vision, blurred vision, or sensitivity to light may briefly occur.

Please see Important Facts for VIAGRA on the following page or visit viagra.com for full prescribing information.

You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.FDA.gov/medwatch or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

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 **VIAGRA[®]**
(*sildenafil citrate*) tablets

IMPORTANT FACTS



VIAGRA[®]
(sildenafil citrate) tablets

(vi-AG-rah)

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION ABOUT VIAGRA

Never take VIAGRA if you take any medicines with nitrates. This includes nitroglycerin. Your blood pressure could drop quickly. It could fall to an unsafe or life-threatening level.

ABOUT ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED)

Erectile dysfunction means a man cannot get or keep an erection. Health problems, injury, or side effects of drugs may cause ED. The cause may not be known.

ABOUT VIAGRA

VIAGRA is used to treat ED in men. When you want to have sex, VIAGRA can help you get and keep an erection when you are sexually excited. You cannot get an erection just by taking the pill. Only your doctor can prescribe VIAGRA.

VIAGRA does not cure ED.

VIAGRA does not protect you or your partner from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) or HIV. You will need to use a condom.

VIAGRA is not a hormone or an aphrodisiac.

WHO IS VIAGRA FOR?

Who should take VIAGRA?

Men who have ED and whose heart is healthy enough for sex.

Who should NOT take VIAGRA?

- If you ever take medicines with nitrates:
 - Medicines that treat chest pain (angina), such as nitroglycerin or isosorbide mononitrate or dinitrate
- If you use some street drugs, such as “poppers” (amyl nitrate or nitrite)
- If you are allergic to anything in the VIAGRA tablet

BEFORE YOU START VIAGRA

Tell your doctor if you have or ever had:

- Heart attack, abnormal heartbeats, or stroke
- Heart problems, such as heart failure, chest pain, angina, or aortic valve narrowing
- Low or high blood pressure
- Severe vision loss
- An eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa
- Kidney or liver problems
- Blood problems, such as sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- A deformed penis, Peyronie’s disease, or an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- Stomach ulcers or any kind of bleeding problems

Tell your doctor about all your medicines. Include over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products. Tell your doctor if you take or use:

- Medicines called alpha-blockers to treat high blood pressure or prostate problems. Your blood pressure could suddenly get too low. You could get dizzy or faint. Your doctor may start you on a lower dose of VIAGRA.
- Medicines called protease inhibitors for HIV. Your doctor may prescribe a 25 mg dose. Your doctor may limit VIAGRA to 25 mg in a 48-hour period.
- Other methods to cause erections. These include pills, injections, implants, or pumps.
- A medicine called REVATIO. VIAGRA should not be used with REVATIO as REVATIO contains sildenafil, the same medicine found in VIAGRA.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF VIAGRA

Side effects are mostly mild to moderate. They usually go away after a few hours. Some of these are more likely to happen with higher doses.

The most common side effects are:

- Headache
- Feeling flushed
- Upset stomach

Less common side effects are:

- Trouble telling blue and green apart or seeing a blue tinge on things
- Eyes being more sensitive to light
- Blurred vision

Rarely, a small number of men taking VIAGRA have reported these serious events:

- Having an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If the erection is not treated right away, long-term loss of potency could occur.
- Sudden decrease or loss of sight in one or both eyes. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. They may be caused by conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes. If you have sudden vision changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Sudden decrease or loss of hearing. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. If you have sudden hearing changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeats, and death. We do not know whether these events are caused by VIAGRA or caused by other factors. Most of these happened in men who already had heart problems.

If you have any of these problems, stop VIAGRA. Call your doctor right away.

HOW TO TAKE VIAGRA

Do:

- Take VIAGRA only the way your doctor tells you. VIAGRA comes in 25 mg, 50 mg, and 100 mg tablets. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- If you are over 65 or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg).
- Take VIAGRA about 1 hour before you want to have sex. VIAGRA starts to work in about 30 minutes when you are sexually excited. VIAGRA lasts up to 4 hours.

Don’t:

- Do not take VIAGRA more than once a day.
- Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor tells you. If you think you need more VIAGRA, talk with your doctor.
- Do not start or stop any other medicines before checking with your doctor.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

- This is only a summary of important information. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for complete product information OR
- Go to www.viagra.com or call (888) 4-VIAGRA (484-2472).



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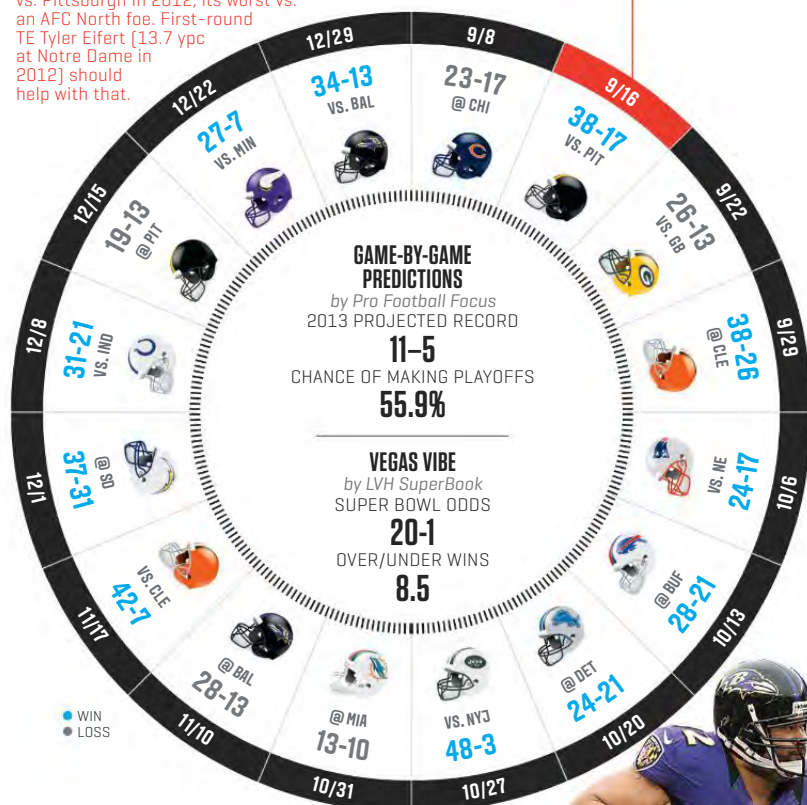
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PREVIEW

A NEW YEAR Cincy averaged only 3.1 yards per play with multiple TEs vs. Pittsburgh in 2012, its worst vs. an AFC North foe. First-round TE Tyler Eifert (13.7 ypc at Notre Dame in 2012) should help with that.



AFC NORTH
CINCINNATI BENGALS
NFL'S BEST FRONT FOUR COULD MAKE THESE CATS KINGS OF THE NORTH.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

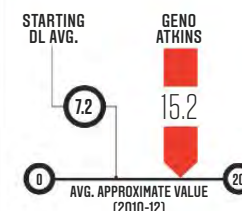
OFFENSE
14

DEFENSE
12

The Bengals defense can beat you straight up—its 37 sacks when rushing four or fewer led the NFL. Or the D can beat you with the blitz, allowing just 4.4 yards per pass (sixth in NFL) when bringing six or more. Giving **Andy Dalton** a solid second target across from WR A.J. Green—maybe Mohamed Sanu (4 TDs in 2012)—would be the biggest help in surpassing our offensive projection.

NON-QB MVP

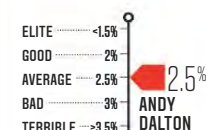
by Pro-Football Reference



With an AV of 18, Atkins' 2012 campaign was among the 25 greatest seasons ever by a DT. His 12.5 sacks helped the Bengals D-line rack up an 8.7% adjusted sack rate, tied for the league lead.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



An unusual amount of tipped passes and receiver mistakes led to Dalton's 38 INTs/near INTs in 2012 [tied for third most in AFC]. All Dalton (2.5% BDR in 2012) needs is better luck for his pick total [16 in 2012] to decrease significantly.

AFC NORTH

BALTIMORE RAVENS

PRIMED FOR A REPEAT? ONLY IF FLACCO SHELVES HIS RISKY THROWS.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

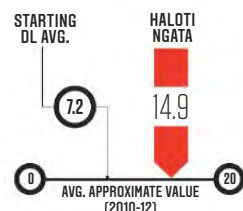
OFFENSE
6

DEFENSE
16

Ray Rice is the only player to have 250 rushes and 50 catches every year since '09. But don't worry about his stamina. Research shows that only carries wear down a back, not receptions, and Rice's 257 rushes ranked 14th in 2012. Massive personnel turnover on defense—departed players made 59% of plays in 2012—needed to happen after a rare mediocre season [19th in DVOA].

NON-QB MVP

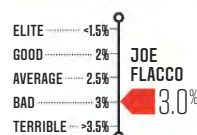
by Pro-Football Reference



A 335-pound run-stuffing monstrosity, **Haloti Ngata** led all Ravens defenders in AV each of the past three seasons. In fact, no DT has racked up more tackles [186] or AV points [76] than Ngata since 2008.

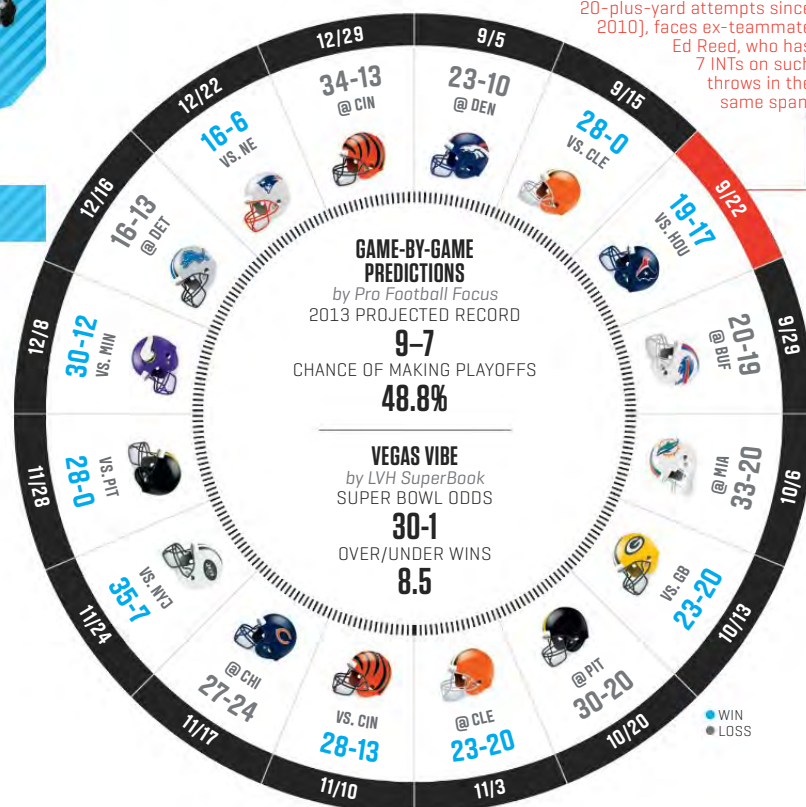
BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



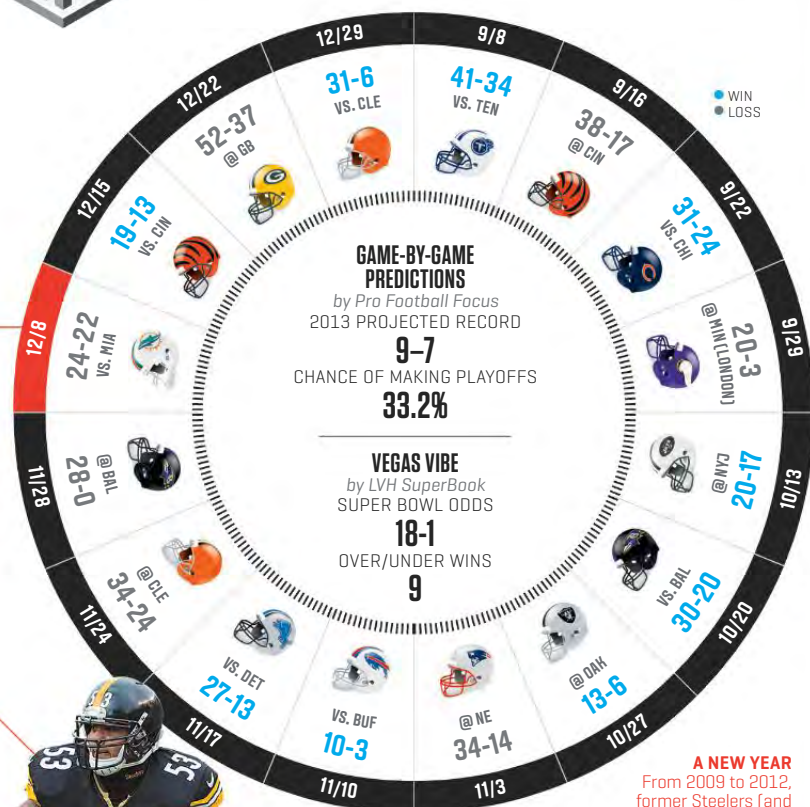
A Super Bowl MVP will do nothing to quell Flacco's reputation as an unnecessary risk taker. His BDR has ranked in the top 15 only twice in five NFL seasons, and in 2012 Flacco was one of only eight QBs with a BDR of 3% or above.

A NEW YEAR Joe Flacco, the NFL's highest-volume deep passer (218 20-plus-yard attempts since 2010), faces ex-teammate Ed Reed, who has 7 INTs on such throws in the same span.





PREVIEW



AFC NORTH PITTSBURGH STEELERS

CENTER-QB EXCHANGE IS IN GOOD HANDS. NOW, ABOUT THE RECEIVERS ...

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

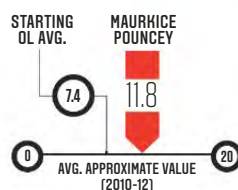
OFFENSE
19
DEFENSE
2

NON-QB MVP

by Pro-Football Reference

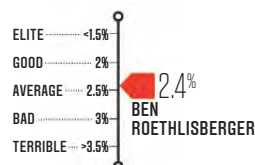
The NFL's oldest defense finally gets younger with first-round OLB Jarvis Jones (14.5 sacks at Georgia in 2012) and third-year CB Cortez Allen (12th in adjusted yards per pass). A youthful O-line will need time to jell, which puts the onus on Ben Roethlisberger to stay healthy (eight missed games since 2010) and find a big-play target to replace Mike Wallace. No returning receiver had more than 800 yards last season.

With three Pro Bowls and 37 AV points in his first three seasons, **Maurkice Pouncey** is the undisputed best center in football. The only concern: a leg injury that left him hobbled in the second half of 2012.



BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



O-coordinator Todd Haley is back, and so is the more accurate and nimble Big Ben: In 2012 Roethlisberger (2.4% BDR) tied for eighth-lowest INT/near INT rate (5%), and his 5 TDs on scrambles tied for the NFL lead.



AFC NORTH CLEVELAND BROWNS

SPEEDY SACKERS GIVE D HOPE, BUT WEEDEN DRAGS DOWN OFFENSE.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

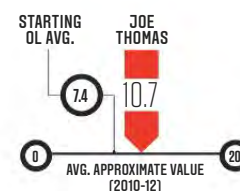
OFFENSE
28
DEFENSE
11

OLBs Paul Kruger (9 sacks, 21 hurries in 2012) and first-rounder Barkevious Mingo (28 QB pressures at LSU last year, tied for second most in the SEC) give new D-coordinator Ray Horton the speed off the edge he had last season at Arizona, which was seventh in adjusted sack rate. The main issue in Cleveland: The WR corps lacks experience, and **Brandon Weeden** (35th in Total QBR) remains a project at best.

NON-QB MVP

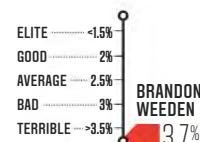
by Pro-Football Reference

The NFL's most reliable left tackle in 2012, Thomas went 73.6 snaps for every missed block and was the biggest reason a young Browns O-line posted the league's 12th-best pass-protection numbers.



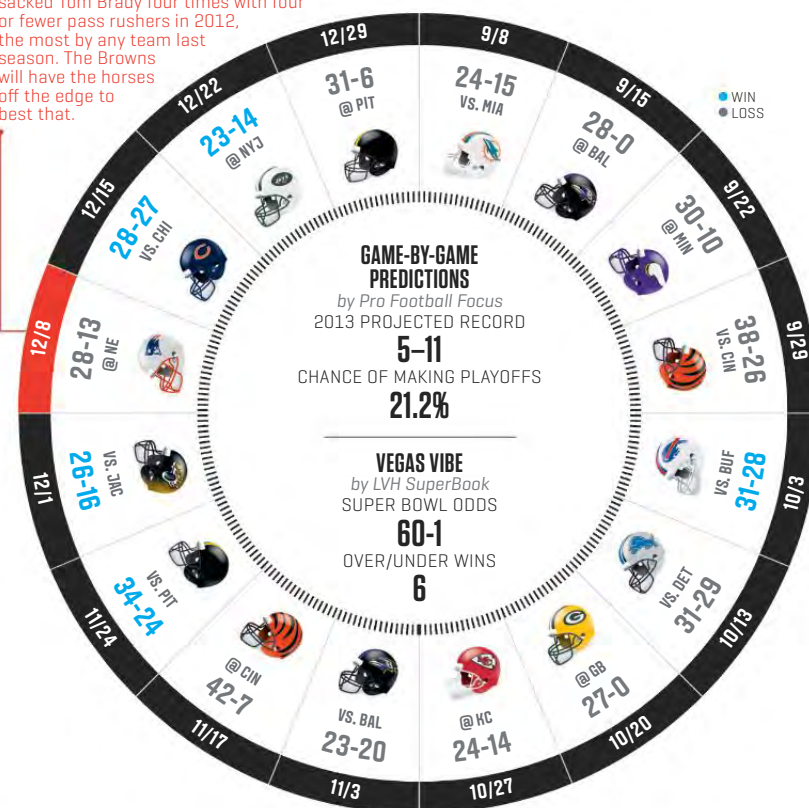
BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Weeden's 3.7% BDR (second to last in NFL), 7.5% vertical INT rate (37th) and 11.8% stretch vertical INT rate (second to last) will be problematic in Norv Turner's system, which puts an emphasis on the deep-passing game.

A NEW YEAR Ray Horton's Arizona D sacked Tom Brady four times with four or fewer pass rushers in 2012, the most by any team last season. The Browns will have the horses off the edge to best that.



BLING

FOR YOUR BREATH



Introducing the world's most delightful breath mint.
New Mentos Breath Mints.





PREVIEW

AFC SOUTH

HOUSTON
TEXANSWITH WATT LIGHTING UP QBs, IT'S
SUPER BOWL OR BUST IN HOUSTON.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

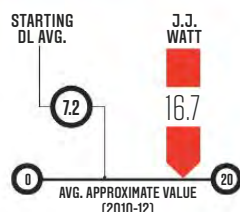
by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
13
DEFENSE
10

J.J. Watt understandably stole the headlines in 2012 with one of the best seasons we've tracked by a D-lineman. But don't sleep on the Texans secondary (our No. 4 pass D in 2012), especially after the team signed S Ed Reed. On offense, improving the right side of the line and getting results from rookie WR DeAndre Hopkins (1,405 yards, 18 TDs for Clemson in 2012) are critical.

NON-QB MVP

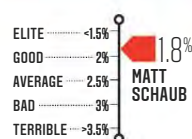
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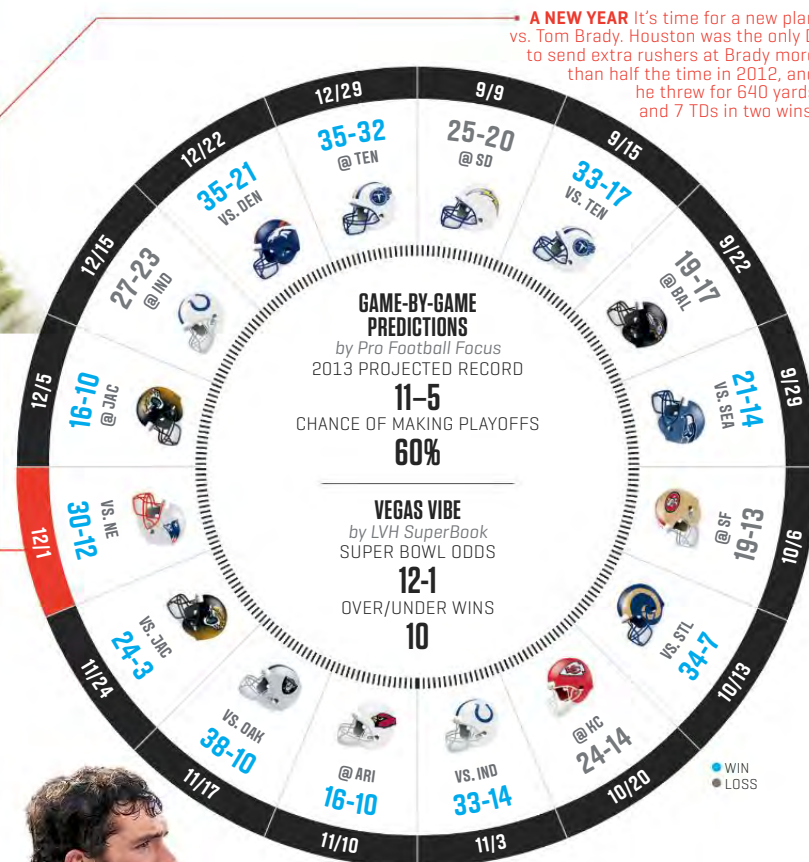
Forget Adrian Peterson: Watt's 20 AV points made him MVP material in 2012. His season—20.5 sacks (sixth highest ever), 18 batted-down balls (tops in NFL)—was the best ever by a DE so young (23).

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner

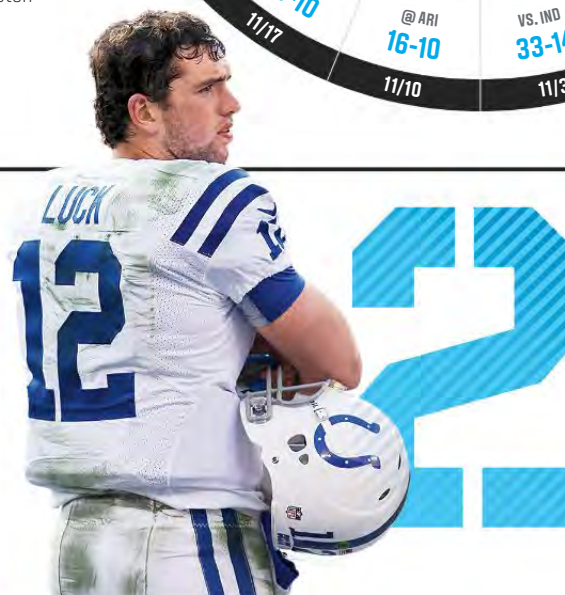
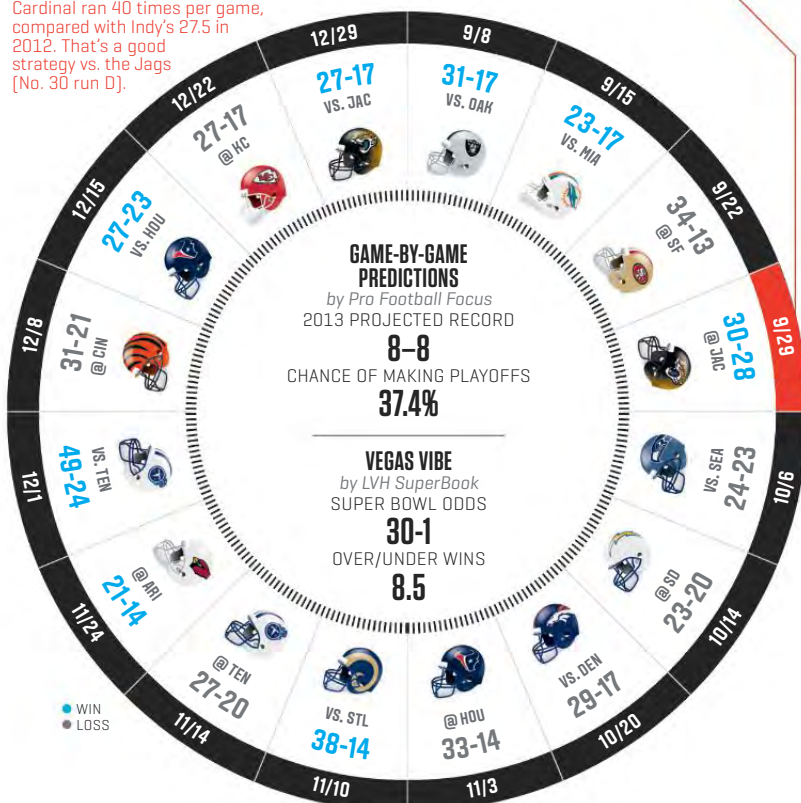


In 2012 Schaub (1.8% BDR) threw only 9.2% of his passes 20-plus yards (32nd in NFL). That should change with the rookie Hopkins (22.6 stretch vertical ypa at Clemson in 2012) lining up opposite Andre Johnson.



A NEW YEAR It's time for a new plan vs. Tom Brady. Houston was the only D to send extra rushers at Brady more than half the time in 2012, and he threw for 640 yards and 7 TDs in two wins.

A NEW YEAR Pep Hamilton, Andrew Luck's Stanford OC, takes over Indy's offense. With Luck in 2011, the Cardinal ran 40 times per game, compared with Indy's 27.5 in 2012. That's a good strategy vs. the Jags (No. 30 run D).



AFC SOUTH

INDIANAPOLIS
COLTSTHE COLTS DON'T HAVE THE HORSES
TO HANG WITH HOUSTON.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

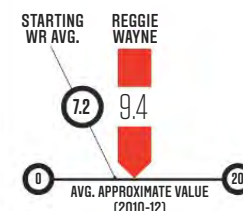
by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
17
DEFENSE
26

Can new O-linemen RT Gosder Cherilus and LG Donald Thomas help keep **Andrew Luck** upright? The QB was knocked down after a pass 83 times as a rookie, 20 more than any other QB last season. The defense will need more than its nice offseason signings—S LaRon Landry and first-round DE Bjoern Werner—to improve much on our No. 27 pass D and No. 32 run unit from 2012.

NON-QB MVP

by Pro-Football Reference



Following up a stellar decade as Peyton Manning's most productive WR, all Wayne has done the past two seasons is collect 29.3% of the Colts' adjusted catch yards, the ninth-best rate in football.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



The high-percentage passing that Luck used at Stanford hasn't yet translated to the NFL. His 57 INTs/near INTs (last in NFL) and 3% BDR reveal a rookie forcing things. A familiar face at OC will help Luck assess risk vs. reward.

AFC SOUTH

TENNESSEE TITANS

ANOTHER TALL ORDER FOR
THE TITANS' WILTING D.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE DEFENSE

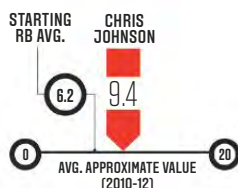
26 28

Good news for RB **Chris Johnson**: His offensive line, which ranked as our second-worst run-blocking unit, should only improve with better health, depth and the addition of first-round G Chance Warmack [6'2", 317]. But any run-based offense also requires a good defense, and the Titans return nine starters from a bad one [32nd in ppg; 29th vs. the run, according to DVOA]. New SS Bernard Pollard can help only so much.

NON-QB MVP

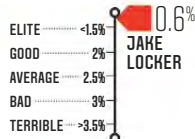
by Pro-Football
Reference

Though he's no longer CJ2K, Johnson is more than serviceable. His 2,290 rushing yards since 2011 ranks sixth; only three others broke more runs of 15-plus yards during that span.



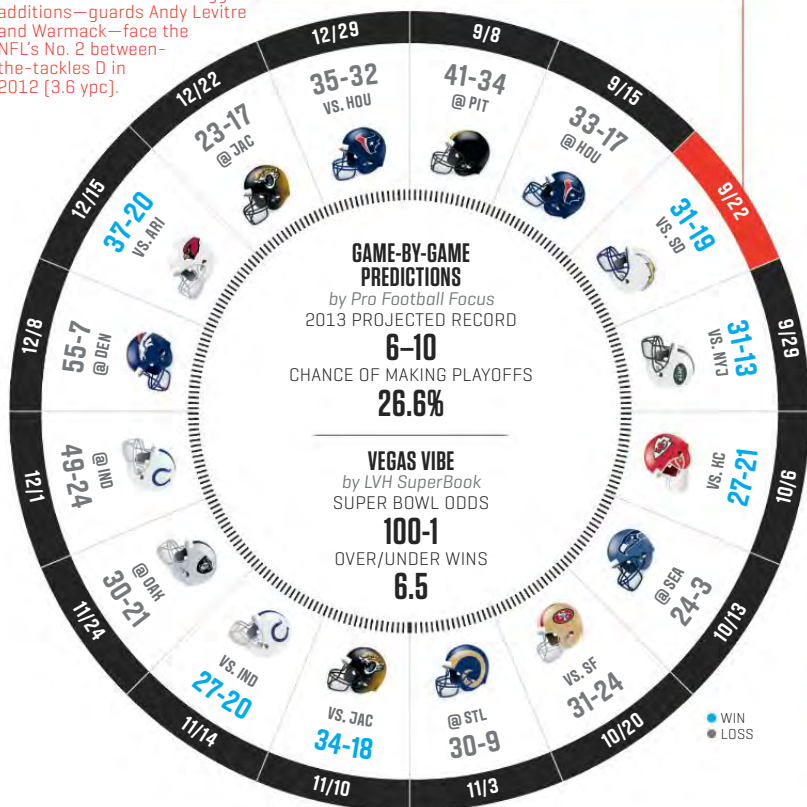
BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner

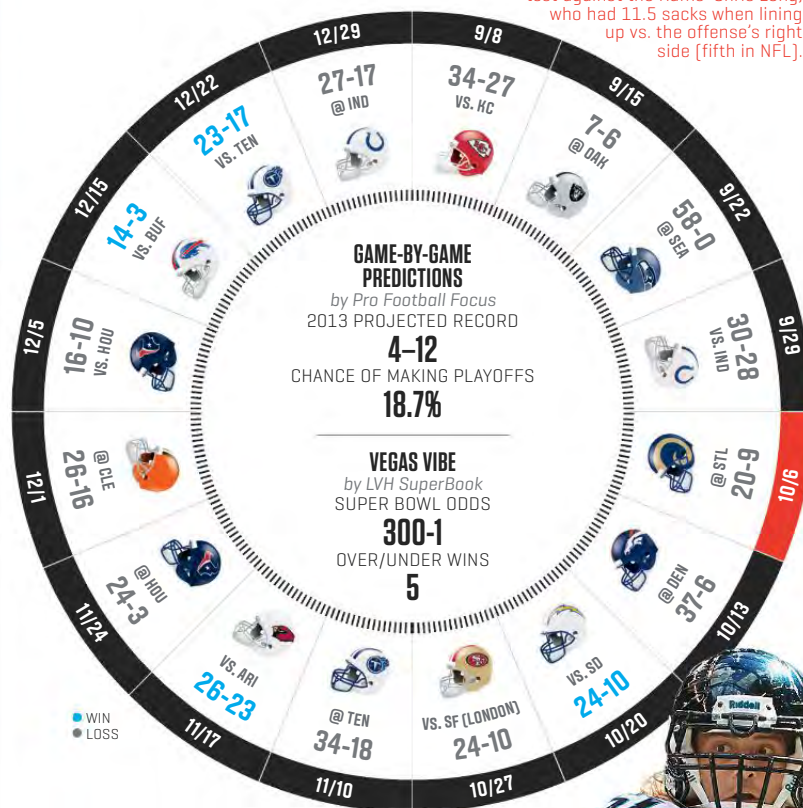


Locker had the NFL's best BDR in 2012 [0.6%]. That is not a misprint; he made only two miscues on 314 attempts. Don't expect a huge regression: The Titans face the easiest collection of pass D's, according to my metrics.

A NEW YEAR The Titans' biggest additions—guards Andy Levitre and Warmack—face the NFL's No. 2 between-the-tackles D in 2012 (3.6 ypc).



A NEW YEAR RT Luke Joeckel, the No. 2 overall pick, will get his first big test against the Rams' Chris Long, who had 11.5 sacks when lining up vs. the offense's right side (fifth in NFL).



AFC SOUTH

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

300-1? TO WIN THE SUPER BOWL?
OUR ADVICE: STAY FAR, FAR AWAY.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE DEFENSE

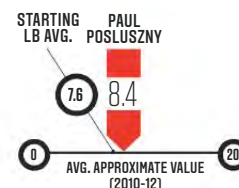
31 30

The fate of the offense depends on RB Maurice Jones-Drew's health [only 414 yards in six games in 2012] and WR Cecil Shorts' early development [17.8 ypc, second in NFL], especially with fellow WR Justin Blackmon [DUI] suspended for four weeks. Head coach Gus Bradley likely will need another year to fully develop his defense, which had the worst adjusted sack rate in 2012 and replaces three starting DBs.

NON-QB MVP

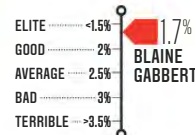
by Pro-Football
Reference

A wide-necked tackling machine stuck in football purgatory, **Paul Posluszny** has recorded 452 solo tackles since 2008. The only NFLers with more? Pro Bowlers Chad Greenway and Patrick Willis.



BAD DECISION RATE

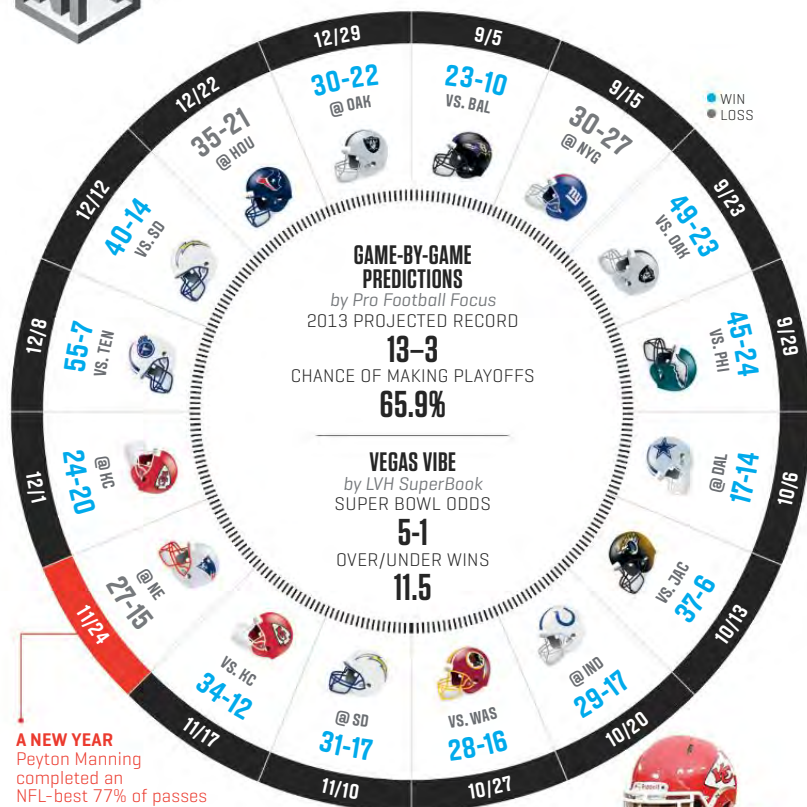
by KC Joyner



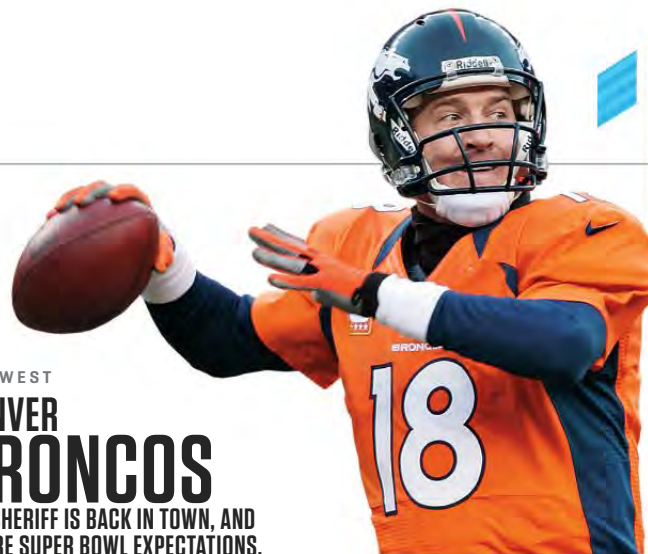
Give Gabbert some credit: He cut his BDR from 3.7% to 1.7% in 2012, and my metrics suggest he'll continue the downward trend this season. The next step is to increase his 5.9 ypa; only two QBs were worse in 2012.



PREVIEW



A NEW YEAR Peyton Manning completed an NFL-best 77% of passes to slot WRs in 2012 (minimum 50 attempts). That explains the signing of ex-Pat Wes Welker, who had an NFL-high 1,033 receiving yards from the slot.



AFC WEST

DENVER BRONCOS

THE SHERIFF IS BACK IN TOWN, AND SO ARE SUPER BOWL EXPECTATIONS.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

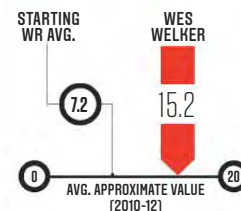
by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE 3
DEFENSE 21

Denver is down to its third center, but with **Peyton Manning** throwing to the NFL's top WRs, the O isn't a concern. The D (our No. 5 in 2012) should regress after fielding the best third-down unit since the '91 Saints. Our data shows that elite third-down units tend to decline the next year. The D will miss Elvis Dumervil (37.5 sacks since 2009) and won't likely stay as healthy (11th in adjusted games lost).

NON-QB MVP

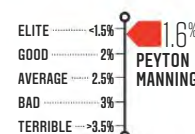
by Pro-Football Reference



The NFL's most prolific pass catcher over the past eight seasons, Welker (average of 1,462 yards per season since 2011) will stand out even next to fellow 1,000-yard WRs Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



In 2012 Manning registered a career-low 1.6% BDR (fifth best in NFL), a 4.3% INT/near INT rate (second best in NFL) and a 68.6% completion rate (second best of his career). Noodle arm? What noodle arm?

AFC WEST

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

A TEAM LONG ON POTENTIAL COULD BE POTENT BEFORE LONG.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

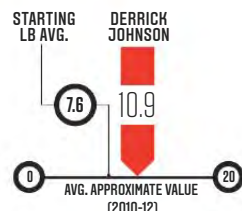
by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE 23
DEFENSE 32

Only Arizona made a bigger upgrade at QB, but Dwayne Bowe is the only reliable pass catcher for Alex Smith (unless, of course, you count RB Jamaal Charles, whom Andy Reid is hyping as Brian Westbrook 2.0). A wealth of talent returns on all three levels of the D, but this is still a unit that gave up the fifth-most passes of 25-plus yards despite being dead last in opponent pass attempts.

NON-QB MVP

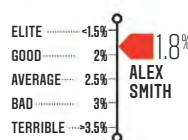
by Pro-Football Reference



The No. 15 pick in 2005, **Derrick Johnson** grew into his role as one of the NFL's premier run-stuffing LBs. The eight-year vet's three best seasons have been his last three (103 tackles per year).

BAD DECISION RATE

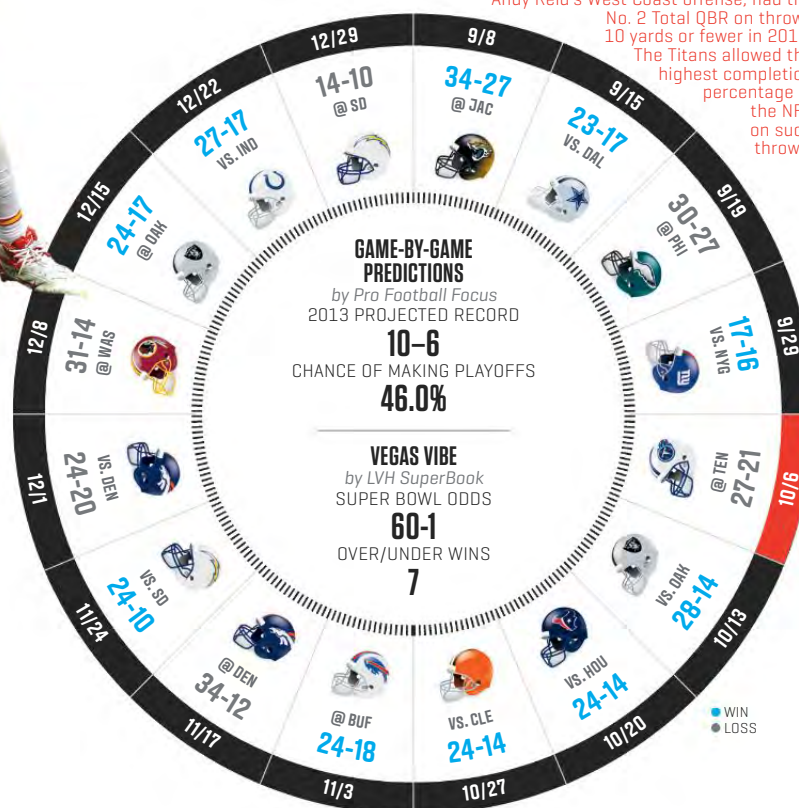
by KC Joyner

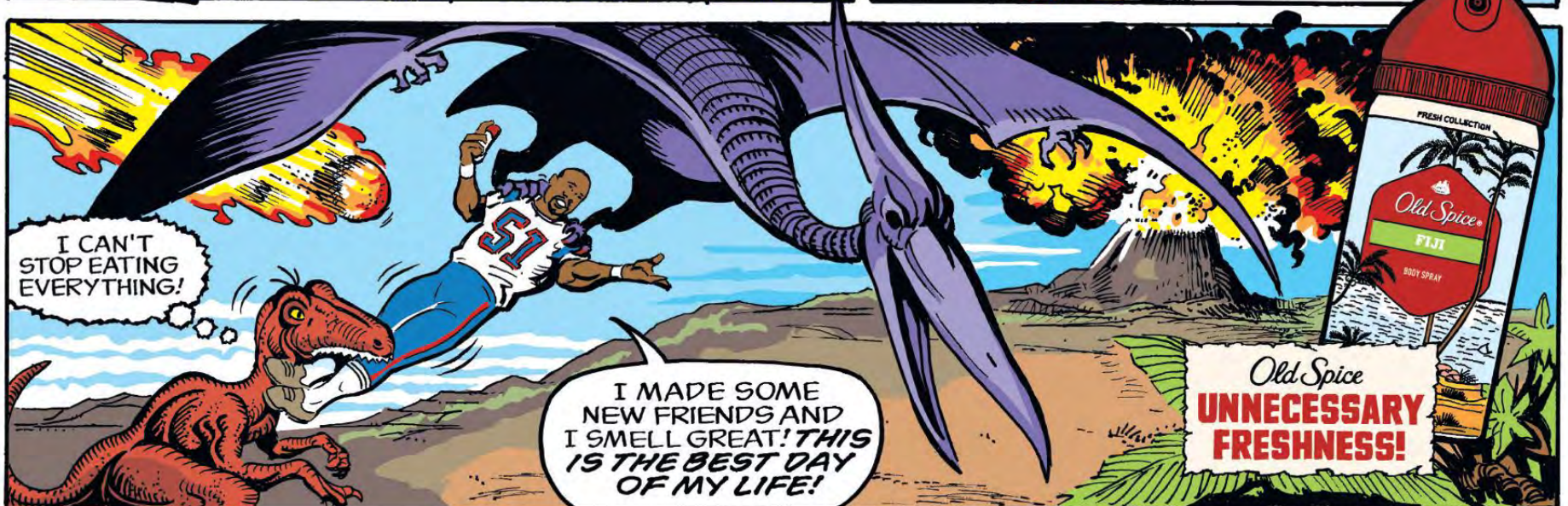
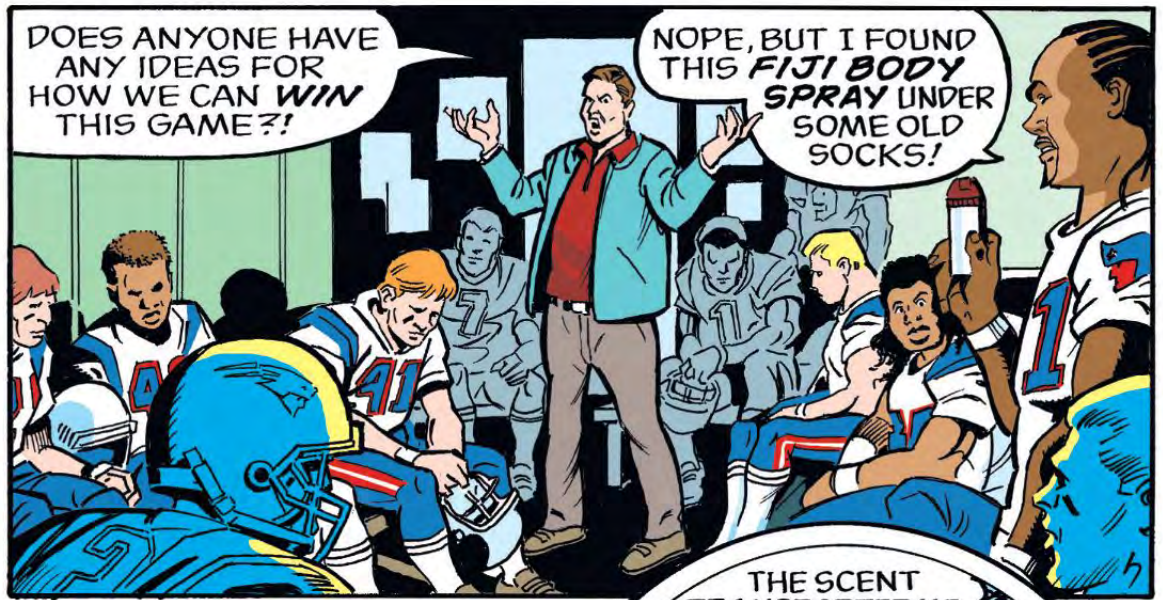


This is what a game manager looks like? Top four in short pass ypa, vertical ypa, stretch vertical ypa and, oh yeah, overall ypa. Smith (1.8% BDR in 2012) was off target on only 14% of his throws last season (sixth best in NFL).



A NEW YEAR Alex Smith, who's taking over Andy Reid's West Coast offense, had the No. 2 Total QBR on throws 10 yards or fewer in 2012. The Titans allowed the highest completion percentage in the NFL on such throws.

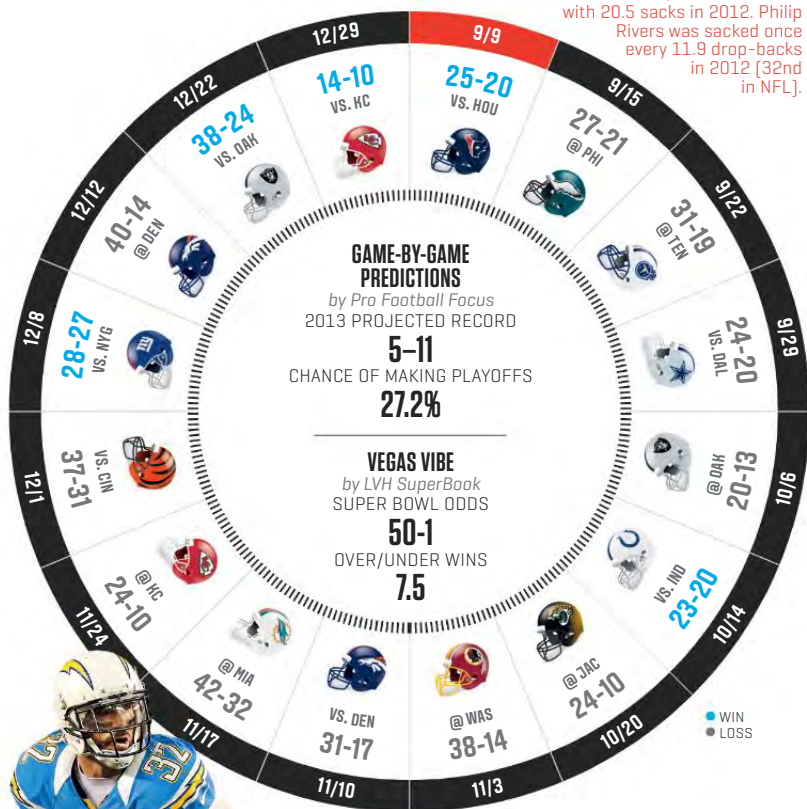






PREVIEW

A NEW YEAR Rookie RT D.J. Fluker and newly signed LT Max Starks will have their hands full with J.J. Watt, who led the NFL with 20.5 sacks in 2012. Philip Rivers was sacked once every 11.9 drop-backs in 2012 (32nd in NFL).



AFC WEST SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

RIVERS WILL NEED A JOLT TO GET THESE CHARGERS PLAYOFF-READY.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
20

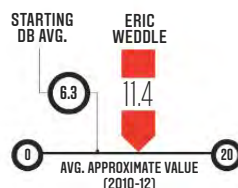
DEFENSE
22

NON-QB MVP

by Pro-Football Reference

This offensive line was a mess last season (8.9% adjusted sack rate, last in NFL). RB Ryan Mathews has missed 10 games in three seasons and didn't give defenses much to worry about last year (3.8 ypc, 1 TD). Massive NT Cam Thomas and ILBs Donald Butler and Manti T'eo will make it tough to run on the Bolts. Of course, with a patchwork secondary, aside from All-Pro safety **Eric Weddle**, third and long won't look so scary to QBs.

Weddle makes headlines for his pass coverage (12 INTs, 31 passes defended since 2010), but he's at his best vs. the run. His 59% stop rate on rush plays was fourth among all qualified DBs last season.



BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Look past Rivers' shoddy throwing motion on deep balls: It was his 1.9% INT rate on short passes (fifth worst in NFL)—and 2.3% BDR—that hurt SD in 2012. Did I mention the Bolts are switching to a short-passing attack?



AFC WEST

OAKLAND RAIDERS

ANOTHER WASTED YEAR. LET THE COUNTDOWN TO CLOWNEY BEGIN ...

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
32

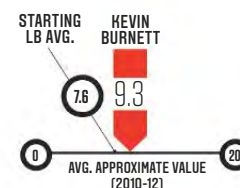
DEFENSE
17

Carrying \$49 million in dead money, GM Reggie McKenzie overhauled the Raiders roster with 12 new starters—nine on defense alone. The result: an offense devoid of any weapons—the oft-overhyped **Darren McFadden** was dead last in DVOA among starting RBs in 2012—and a defense that will be hard-pressed to surpass last season's 25 sacks (31st in NFL) and 19 forced turnovers (26th).

NON-QB MVP

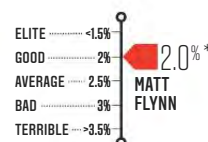
by Pro-Football Reference

Durable (49 straight starts) and a playmaker (311 tackles since 2010, 17th in the NFL), Burnett, the ex-Dolphins LB, is exactly what this porous Raiders defense needs (29th in DVOA in 2012).



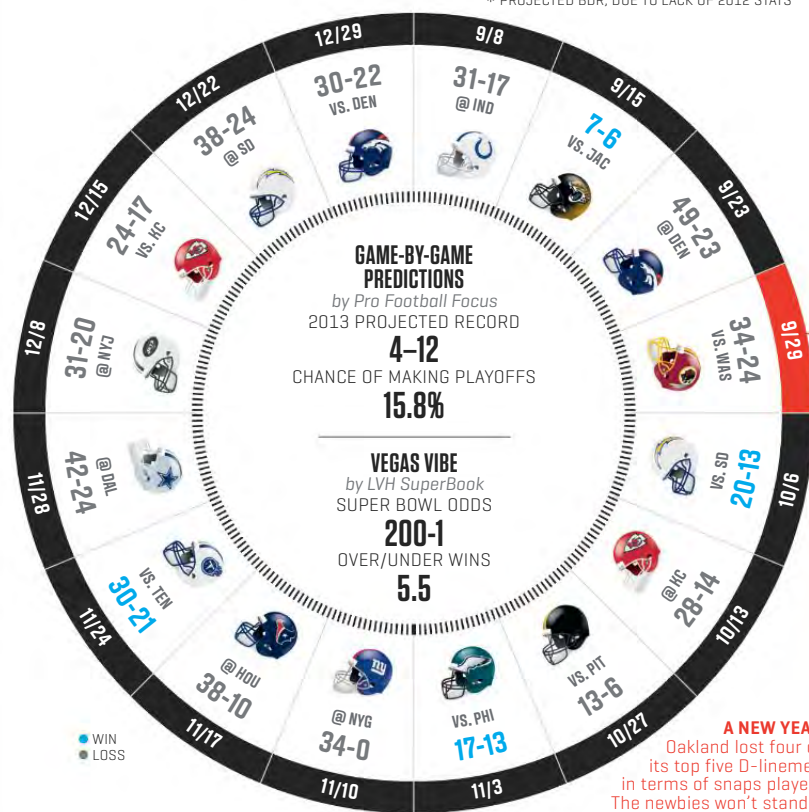
BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Two seasons ago, a 480-yard game—at home in Green Bay vs. a banged-up Detroit secondary—got Flynn a multimillion-dollar deal. Two pit stops later, his luck strikes again: He faces my third-easiest collection of pass D's.

* PROJECTED BDR, DUE TO LACK OF 2012 STATS



A NEW YEAR Oakland lost four of its top five D-linemen in terms of snaps played. The newbies won't stand a chance against the Skins' No. 1 rushing O (169 ypg in 2012).

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PREVIEW

NFC EAST

WASHINGTON REDSKINS

KNEE BRACE IN TOW, RG3 IS BACK TO FINISH WHAT HE STARTED.



UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE

4

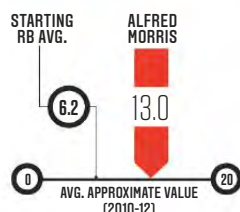
DEFENSE

8

RG3's secret: He can be a pocket QB if the ACL injury hurts his mobility. In 2012 he was more efficient under center than in the pistol or shotgun. The defense returns OLB Brian Orakpo (28.5 sacks from 2009 to '11; torn pectoral in 2012) to a strong front seven. But the re-signing of DeAngelo Hall (81st out of 87 CBs in adjusted yards per pass allowed) spells bad news for the back end.

NON-QB MVP

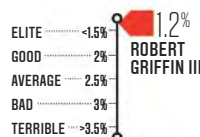
by Pro-Football Reference



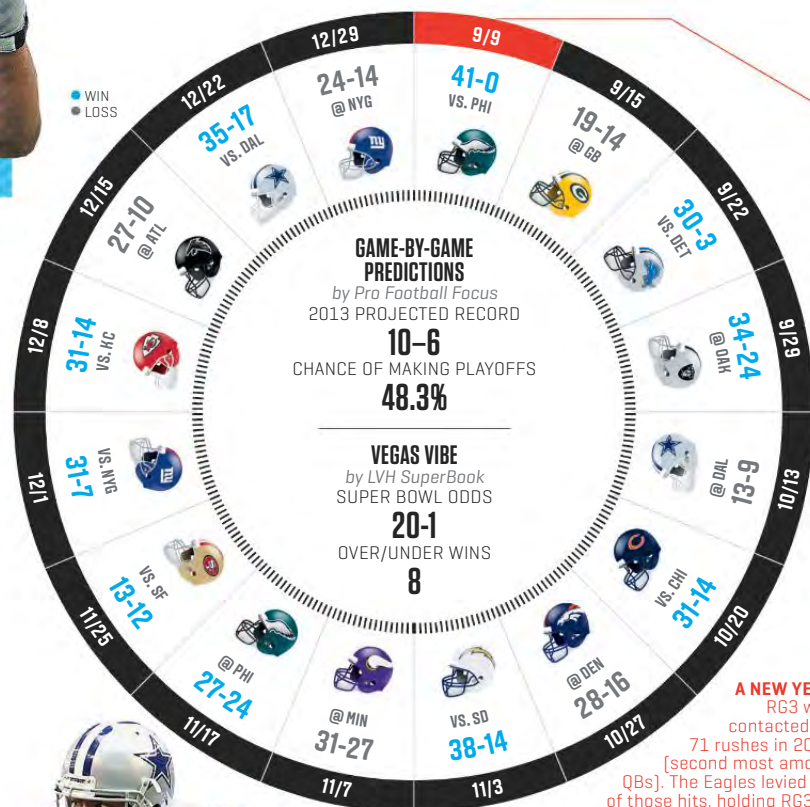
Alfred Morris was a total shock in 2012. The sixth-rounder became only the third rookie to rush for at least 1,600 yards and 13 TDs. Only Adrian Peterson had more 10-plus-yard runs than Morris' 44.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



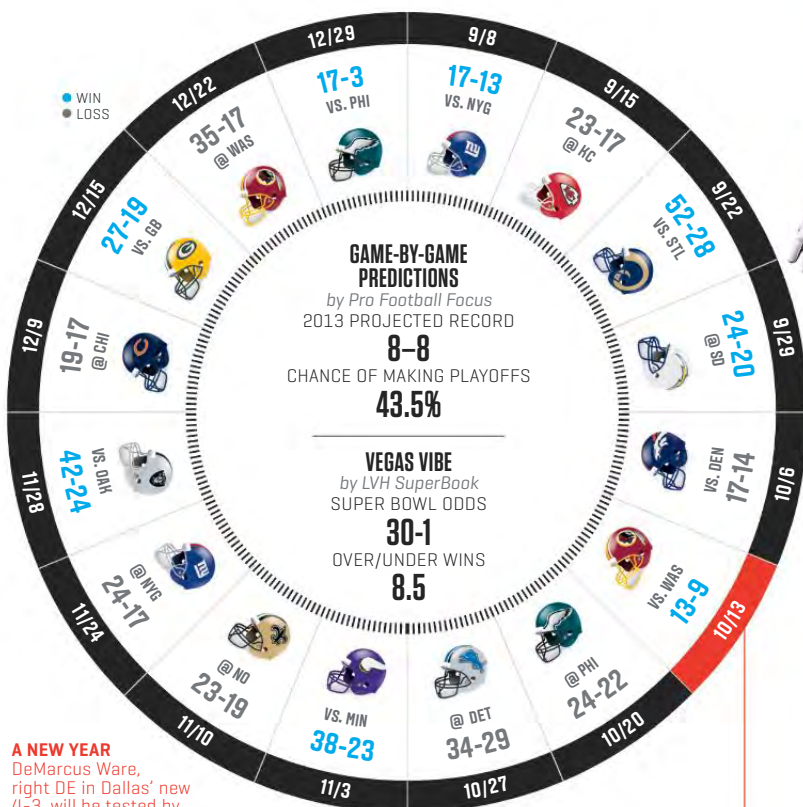
RG3 was both good and a little lucky. His overall BDR (1.2%) tied for third, and his vertical BDR (0.8%) was a league low. But he also benefited from only 22.7% of his potential INTs being picked off (lowest in NFL).



NFC EAST

DALLAS COWBOYS

A THIRD STRAIGHT 8-8 SEASON WON'T SIT WELL IN THE OWNER'S BOX.



UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE

16

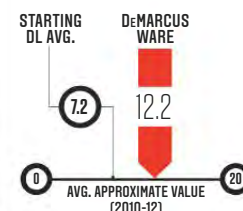
DEFENSE

29

Without a stable running game, QB Tony Romo will lean too heavily on WR Dez Bryant (12 TDs in 2012, third among pass catchers) and TE Jason Witten (110 catches, fifth in NFL). The real problem: Monte Kiffin's defensive scheme—the same one that couldn't stop the Pac-12 read-options last season—will face RG3, then Chip Kelly's mystery Eagles offense in back-to-back weeks twice.

NON-QB MVP

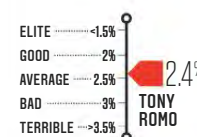
by Pro-Football Reference



DeMarcus Ware leads all edge rushers with 46.5 sacks since 2010. His 32 career forced fumbles are a byproduct of that pressure. It helps that he hasn't missed a game in his eight-year career.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



The Cowboys would be wise to let Romo (2.4% BDR in 2012) take more chances downfield, based on his above-average vertical BDR and a maturing deep threat in Bryant (6 catches of 40-plus yards, second in NFL).

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PREVIEW

NFC EAST

NEW YORK GIANTS

WITH MANNING AT THE CONTROLS,
NOTHING IS OUT OF THE QUESTION.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
10

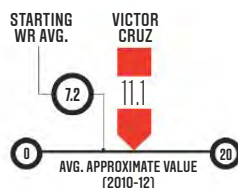
DEFENSE
19

The defense had an adjusted sack rate ranked in the top 10 during its last two Super Bowl seasons. Last year that ranking fell to 22. Injuries and defections—among them DE Osi Umenyiora (Falcons)—make this now-average D (No. 16 in 2012) unlikely to regain its spark. Luckily **Eli Manning** has two talented backs in David Wilson (5.0 ypc as rookie) and Andre Brown (5.3) to help him keep the D off the field.

NON-QB MVP

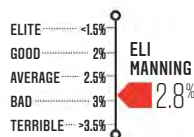
by Pro-Football Reference

Since 2011, Cruz has racked up the fifth-most receiving yards (2,628), eighth-most receiving TDs (19) and 10th-largest share of team adjusted catch yards (28.7%). No wonder the man got paid this offseason.

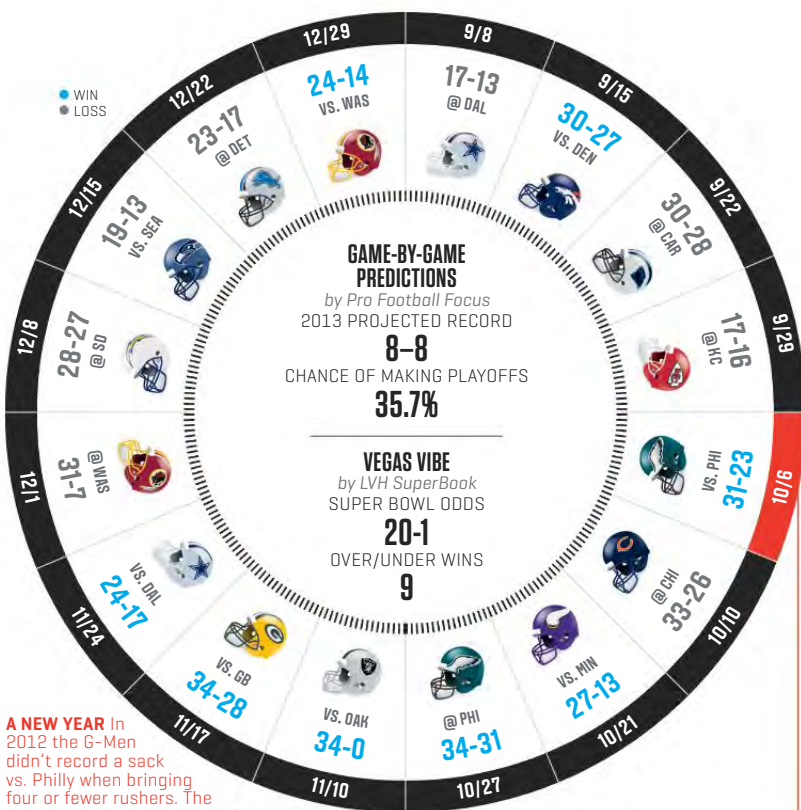


BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner

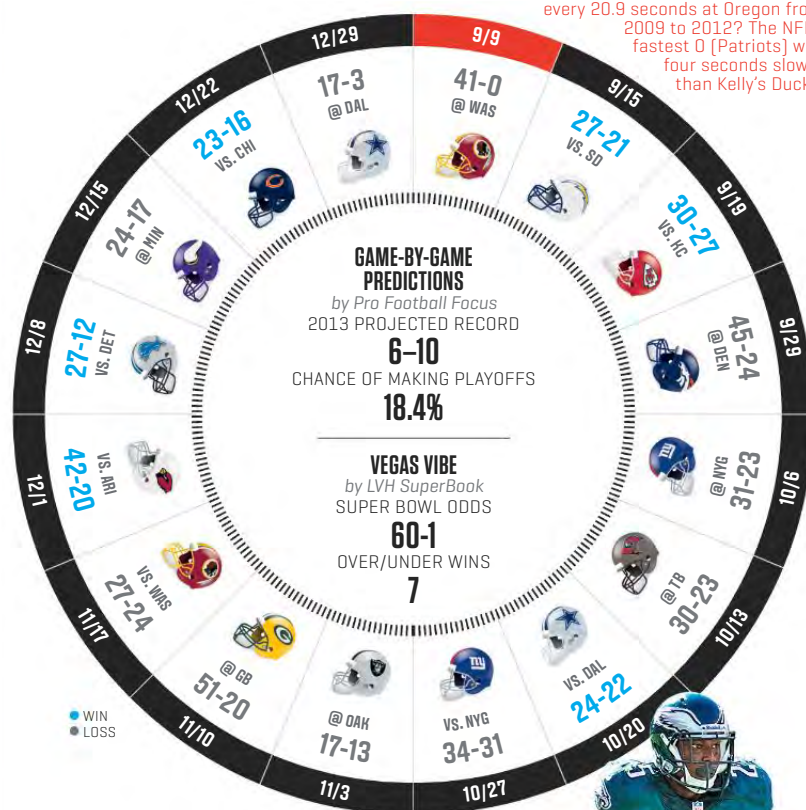


Not all mistakes are created equally. Manning, 2.8% BDR in 2012, had 35 points (worst in NFL) in my weighted bad decision metric, which measures the consequences of faulty throws.



A NEW YEAR In 2012 the G-Men didn't record a sack vs. Philly when bringing four or fewer rushers. The departure of Osi Umenyiora (12 sacks since 2011 in that package) won't help their cause here.

A NEW YEAR Are you ready for Chip Kelly's speed offense, which averaged a play every 20.9 seconds at Oregon from 2009 to 2012? The NFL's fastest O (Patriots) was four seconds slower than Kelly's Ducks.



NFC EAST

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

THE BIRDS ARE ON THE FAST TRACK TO
ANOTHER DISAPPOINTING YEAR.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
18

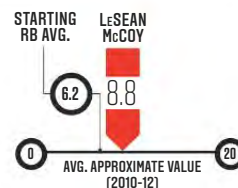
DEFENSE
14

Everything with this team remains a Chip Kelly-cloaked mystery. Sure, the offense—especially the line, which ranked 28th in run blocking last season—will have to adjust to Kelly's fast-paced, run-first scheme. But the defense (our No. 26 unit in 2012) is the biggest wild card: Four new DBs dot the secondary, while the front seven seems ill fit for new defensive coordinator Billy Davis' 3-4 scheme.

NON-QB MVP

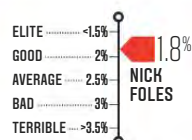
by Pro-Football Reference

Even during a concussion-marred 2012, **LeSean McCoy** had seven runs of 20-plus yards (17th in NFL). With Kelly at the helm, McCoy's versatility (34 total TDs since 2010) will be put to full use.



BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Yes, Kelly wants playmakers, but he's also a zealot about protecting the ball, which is why Foles (1.8% BDR in 2012) should ultimately win this QB battle over Michael Vick. He didn't make one bad decision in four of his seven games as a rookie.

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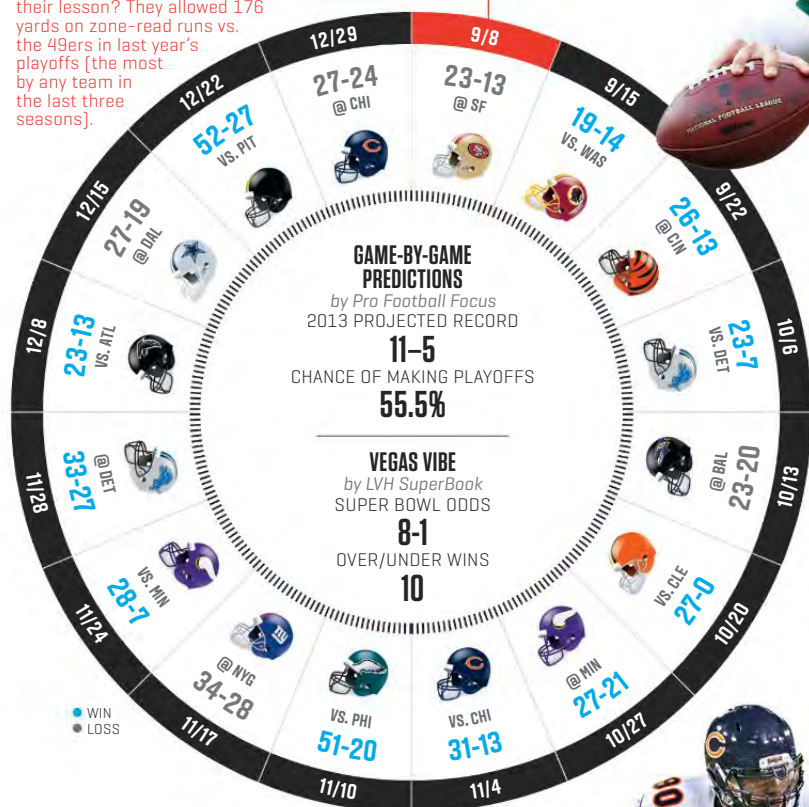
*EPA-estimated 26 city/35 hwy/29 combined mpg. Actual mileage will vary. **Requires 93-octane premium fuel.

Dillon Van Way



PREVIEW

A NEW YEAR Did the Packers learn their lesson? They allowed 176 yards on zone-read runs vs. the 49ers in last year's playoffs [the most by any team in the last three seasons].



NFC NORTH GREEN BAY PACKERS

THE NFL'S BEST QB PACKS A
DIVISION-WINNING PUNCH.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

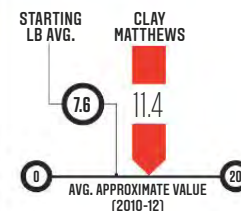
OFFENSE
1

DEFENSE
15

The WRs likely will be healthier this season [seventh in adjusted games lost in 2012], and prized rookie RBs Eddie Lacy and Johnathan Franklin give a real boost to a ground game that ranked 20th in yardage despite an 11-5 record. Likely improvement on third down gives the defense [eighth in DVOA, 21st on third down] a good chance to beat this projection.

NON-QB MVP

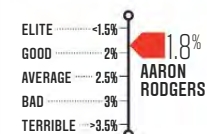
by Pro-Football Reference



Matthews is one of the most versatile LBs near the line. He missed four games in 2012 but still was third among LBs in sacks [13] and had a 73% stop rate vs. the run [22nd among LBs].

BAD DECISION RATE

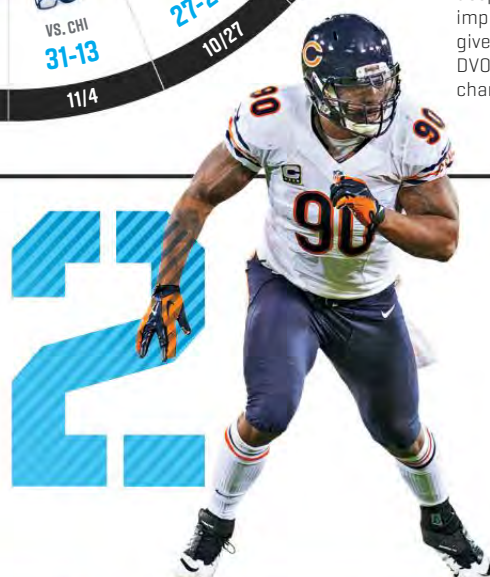
by KC Joyner



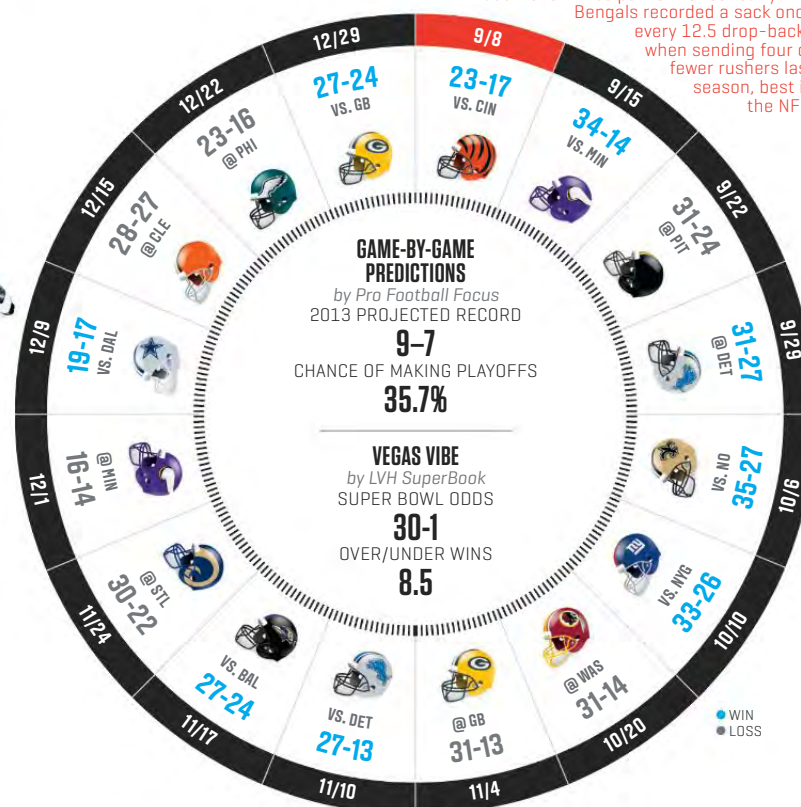
Volume is not what makes **Aaron Rodgers** [1.8% BDR in 2012] the NFL's best; eight QBs threw more passes. But no one closed out drives better: 33 TDs on vertical/stretch vertical throws, six more than the next closest QB.

NFC NORTH CHICAGO BEARS

NEW COACH, SAME STORY: "BEAR DOWN" DEFENSE GOES TO WASTE.



A NEW YEAR Chicago's three offensive line additions will be put to the test early. The Bengals recorded a sack once every 12.5 drop-backs when sending four or fewer rushers last season, best in the NFL.



UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

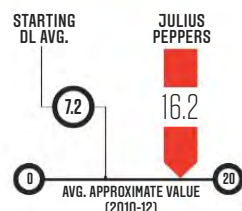
OFFENSE
30

DEFENSE
1

The 2012 Bears D was one of the best we've ever tracked, leading our metrics against both the run and pass. Even factoring in heavy regression, it still projects as our top unit. The O, hamstrung [again] by upheaval up front, needs to find a No. 2 WR. Brandon Marshall was the target of 40.2% of Chicago's passes in 2012; no other WR since '91 has had more than 36% of a team's targets.

NON-QB MVP

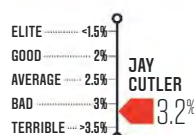
by Pro-Football Reference



By far the league's most prolific defensive lineman over the past decade, **Julius Peppers** shows no signs of slowing down after posting the 10th-best sack season [11.5] in NFL history by a 32-year-old.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



A bad BDR—3.2% in 2012 [third worst in NFL]—has followed Cutler through every NFL system he's played in. Not even offensive innovator and new Bears coach Marc Trestman will change Cutler's risk-taking mentality.

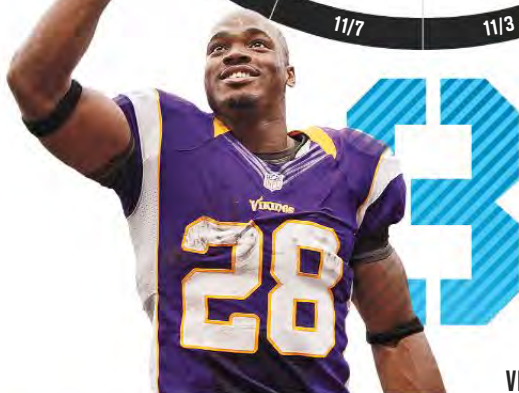
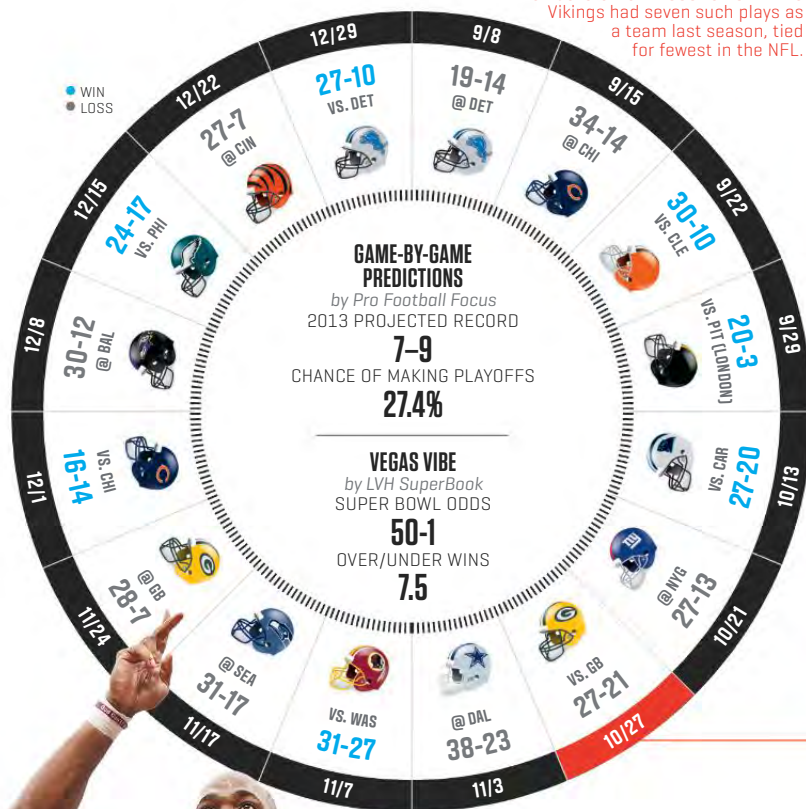


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PREVIEW

A NEW YEAR Greg Jennings had 40 catches of 30-plus yards (fourth most in NFL) with the Packers from 2008 to 2012. The Vikings had seven such plays as a team last season, tied for fewest in the NFL.



NFC NORTH MINNESOTA VIKINGS

PETERSON IS A WONDER, BUT THE VIKES' FATE WILL REST WITH PONDER.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
24

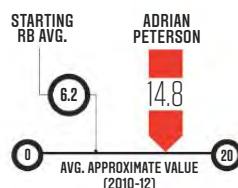
DEFENSE
25

NON-QB MVP

by Pro-Football Reference

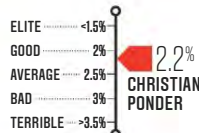
As great as RB **Adrian Peterson** is, the stats show he'll likely regress: The only ball carrier ever to have back-to-back 1,800-yard seasons is Eric Dickerson. This puts offensive improvement in the hands of QB Christian Ponder and new wideout Greg Jennings, who started just five games in 2012. Yikes. Losing CB Antoine Winfield (eighth in adjusted yards per pass allowed) will hurt in a division full of high-volume passers.

Peterson powered Minnesota's O with an astounding 6.0 ypc on 348 carries (second most in NFL). The last time he had 340-plus carries in a season, he led the NFL in TDs the following year.



BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Ponder, with a 2.2% BDR in 2012, doesn't always know when to cut his losses. His three INTs on scrambling plays tied for the NFL lead. Worst of all: His 3.7 ypa on such throws indicates little reward for such risky play.



NFC NORTH DETROIT LIONS

QUESTION IS: WHY DIDN'T STAFFORD TARGET JOHNSON 522 MORE TIMES?

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE
12

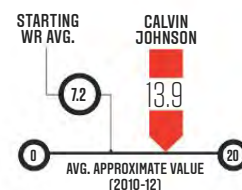
DEFENSE
27

The secondary lacks depth, which showed on sub-packages last season, when the Lions allowed 6.2 yards per play in nickel and dime (23rd) and forced just 10 turnovers (27th). A reversal of fortune—the Lions recovered only 29% of available fumbles in 2012, second worst in the league—and a more diverse offense [Calvin Johnson had an NFL-high 205 targets in 2012] featuring RB Reggie Bush could get Detroit a few extra W's.

NON-QB MVP

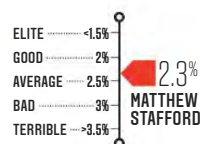
by Pro-Football Reference

This is a pretty easy sell, huh? Fighting through constant double-teams, Megatron has posted an astonishing 19 games of 100-plus yards in the past two seasons. Next closest in the NFL: Wes Welker (13).

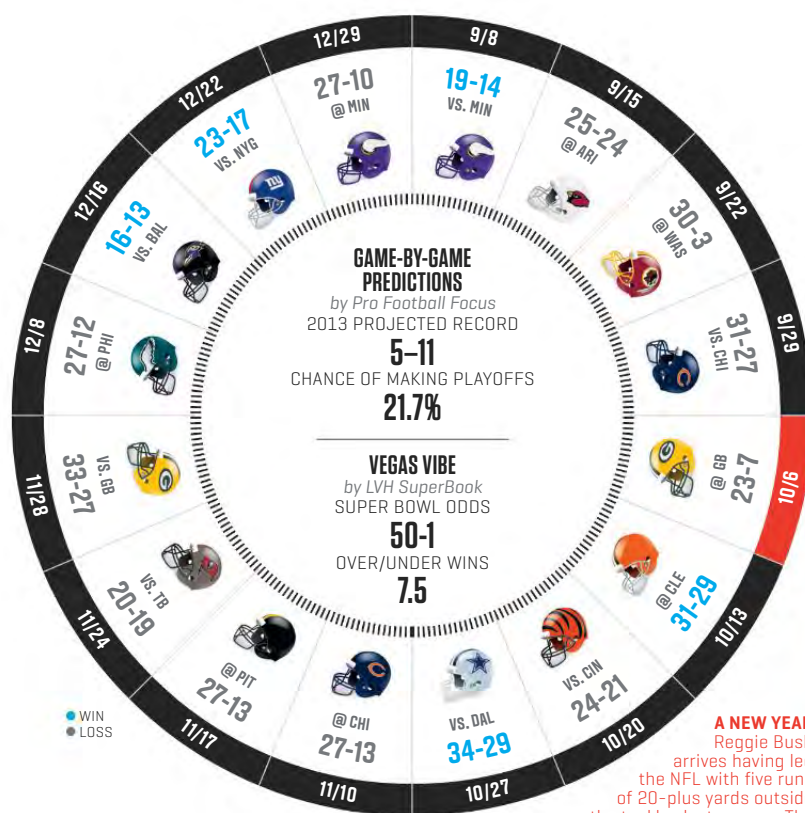


BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Quantity far outweighed quality for Stafford in 2012 (2.3% BDR). He set the record for attempts (727) but had the second-highest INT/near INT total (48) and the most bad decision INTs on short passes (5).



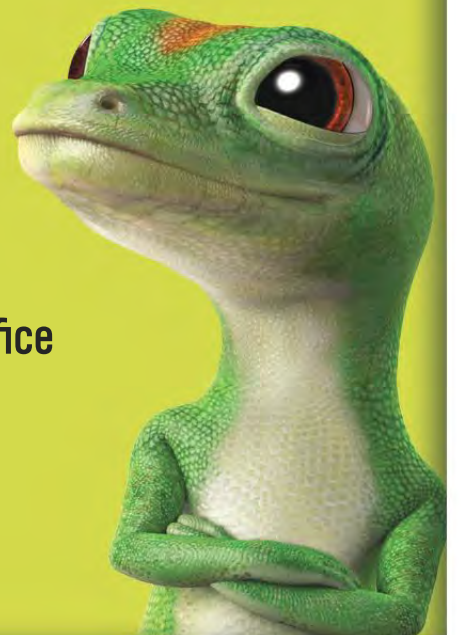
A NEW YEAR Reggie Bush arrives having led the NFL with five runs of 20-plus yards outside the tackles last season. The Packers were the only team to allow such a run vs. the Lions in 2012.

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PREVIEW

NFC SOUTH

ATLANTA FALCONS

THESE GAME BREAKERS WILL PUT UP POINTS IF THE LINE OPENS UP HOLES.



UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

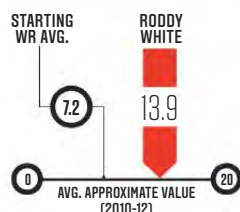
OFFENSE
11

DEFENSE
24

RB Steven Jackson (No. 11 RB in 2012, according to DVOA) will add pop to the Falcons offense, but only if its No. 24 run-blocking line shows improvement. Atlanta hopes that rookie CBs Desmond Trufant and Robert Alford will help boost its pass defense to an elite level (No. 11 in 2012), but that plan could fall short: Even eventually great corners tend to struggle as rookies.

NON-QB MVP

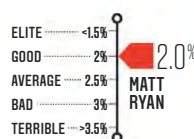
by Pro-Football Reference



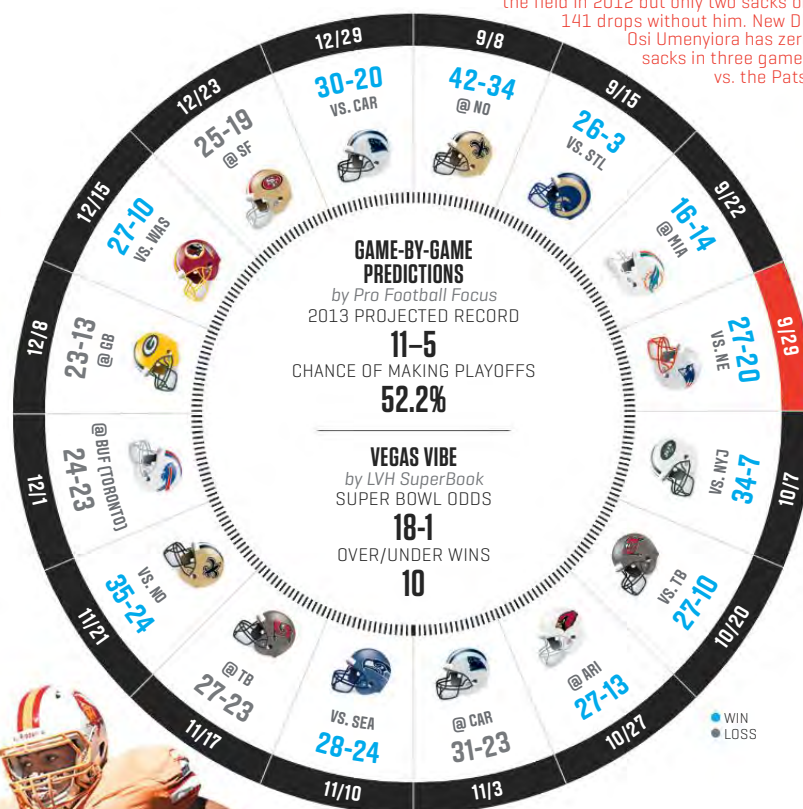
Since 2010, **Roddy White** is second in receiving yards (4,036) and tied for first in targets (502). With Matt Ryan under center, White should notch his seventh straight season of 1,100-plus yards.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Ryan's 14 INTs indicate a down year, but his 4.6% INT/near INT rate (fifth best in NFL) and 2% BDR tell another story. Expect a turnover turnaround from the NFL's most accurate passer in 2012 (68.6% completion rate).



A NEW YEAR The Falcons will miss DE John Abraham. They had 27 sacks in 454 drop-backs with him on the field in 2012 but only two sacks on 141 drops without him. New DE Osi Umenyiora has zero sacks in three games vs. the Pats.

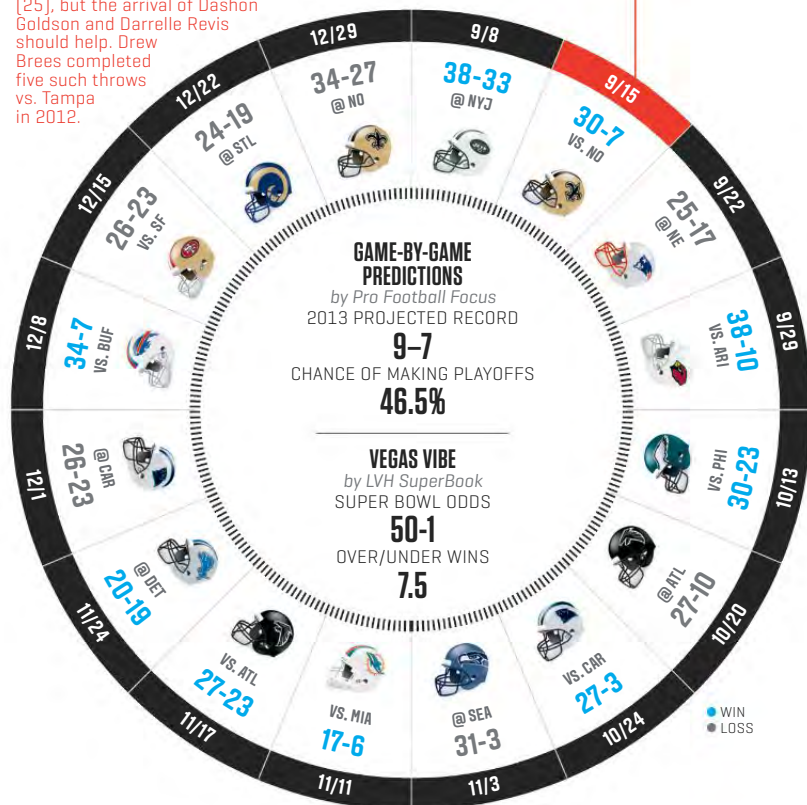


NFC SOUTH

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

THE SECONDARY STOCKED,
THIS D IS PRIMED FOR A TURNAROUND.

A NEW YEAR The Bucs gave up the third-most 30-yard pass plays in 2012 (25), but the arrival of Dashon Goldson and Darrelle Revis should help. Drew Brees completed five such throws vs. Tampa in 2012.



UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

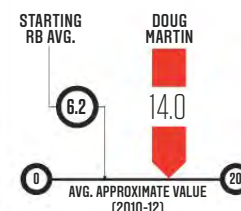
OFFENSE
15

DEFENSE
4

The additions of CB Darrelle Revis (led Jets' top D vs. No. 1 WRs in 2011) and S Dashon Goldson (9 INTs past two seasons) change everything for the Bucs (our No. 26 pass D in 2012). WRs Vincent Jackson (19.2 ypc, No. 1 in NFL) and Mike Williams (15.8, No. 12) will continue to stretch the field if QB Josh Freeman ups his accuracy. He completed only 54.8% of his passes in 2012, 29th in the NFL.

NON-QB MVP

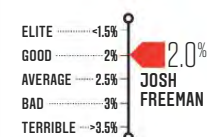
by Pro-Football Reference



Doug Martin's big-play ability helped make up for Freeman's struggles. Martin's five runs of 40-plus yards (tied for second in NFL) helped the Bucs jump from 30th in rushing in 2011 to 15th.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Freeman's 17 INTs in 2012 (tied for fifth most in NFL) were a little misleading. More than one-third of those picks were at least partially—and in many cases entirely—due to a route-running mistake.

FORGET LAST YEAR'S STAINS. NEW YEAR. CLEAN SLATE.



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PREVIEW

NFC SOUTH

CAROLINA PANTHERS

A FEISTY FRONT FOUR LEADS THE WAY FOR THIS REVIVED D.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

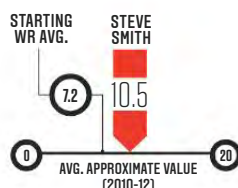
OFFENSE 9 DEFENSE 3

Seven losses by less than a TD and a 5-1 finish suggest a team ready to step forward. Unless, of course, coach Ron Rivera is the problem, which is entirely possible. If rookie D-linemen Star Lotulelei and Kawann Short can help stud DEs Charles Johnson and Greg Hardy [23.5 combined sacks in 2012] create more opportunities for an already-solid secondary (5.8 net ypa allowed, 10th in NFL), this could be a special defense.

NON-QB MVP

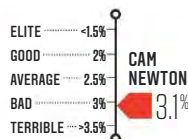
by Pro-Football Reference

Smith edged out LB Luke Kuechly (165 tackles as a rookie) for this honor. Since Cam Newton was drafted in 2011, Smith has accumulated 30% of the team's adjusted catch yards (seventh in NFL).

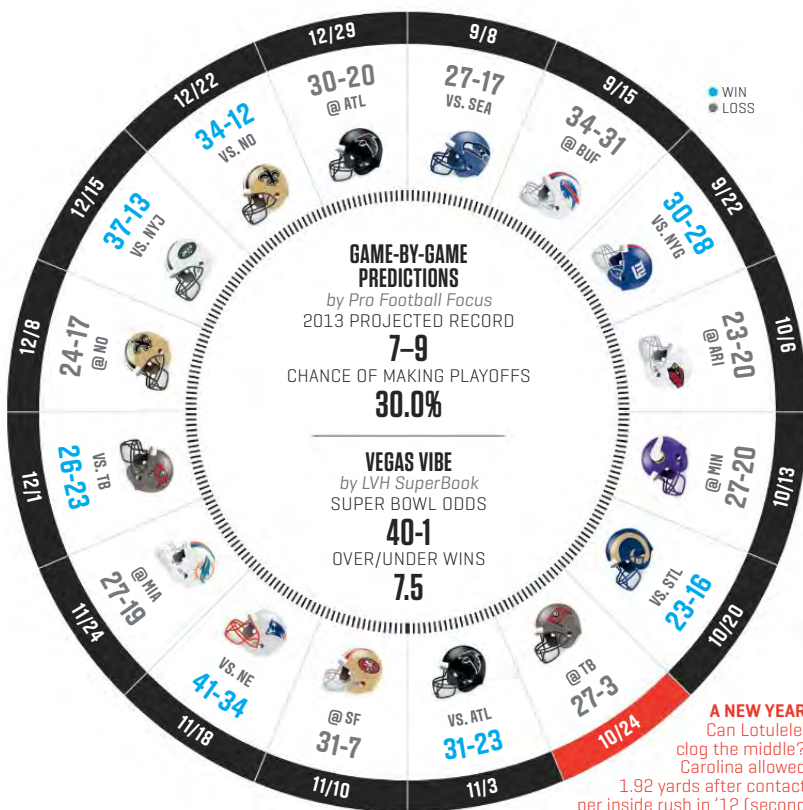


BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner

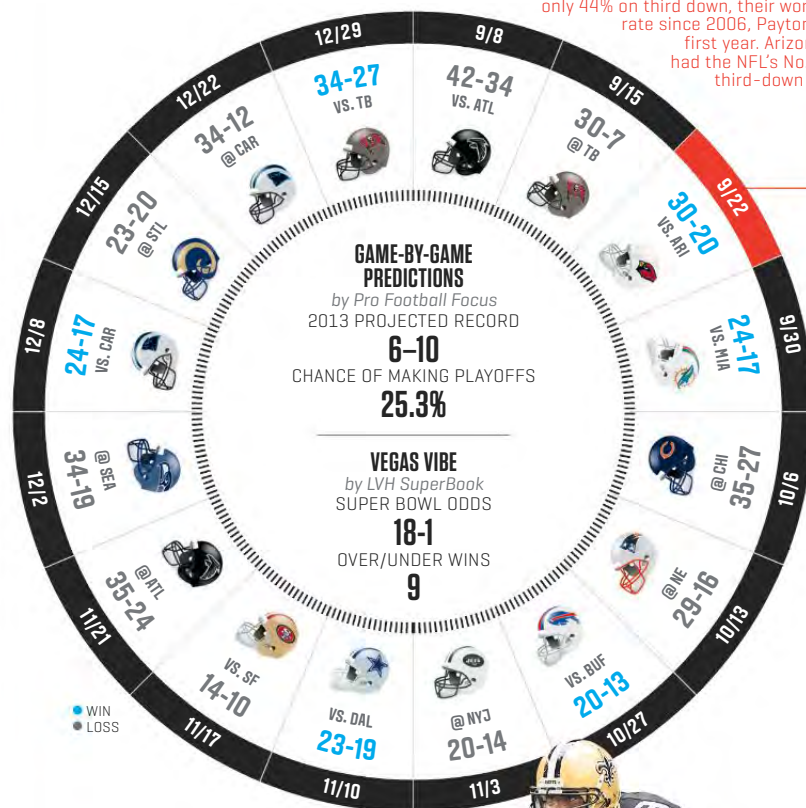


Newton [3.1% BDR in 2012] cut it loose last season, as nearly 36% of his throws were 11-plus yards downfield (third highest in NFL). The reason: He was efficient with the deep ball (3.5% vertical INT rate, 10th best).



A NEW YEAR
Can Lotulelei clog the middle? Carolina allowed 1.92 yards after contact per inside rush in '12 (second most in NFL), including 2.4 yards after contact vs. Bucs RB Doug Martin.

A NEW YEAR Without suspended coach Sean Payton in 2012, the Saints converted only 44% on third down, their worst rate since 2006. Payton's first year, Arizona had the NFL's No. 2 third-down D.



NFC SOUTH

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

PAYTON RETURNS, BUT SO DOES THE INFAMOUS SAINTS DEFENSE.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

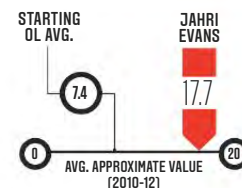
OFFENSE 5 DEFENSE 31

With Sean Payton back, the Saints offense could return to the heights of 2011, when it had one of the 10 best offensive DVOA seasons ever. But even with big-name rookies like S Kenny Vaccaro and DT John Jenkins (6'4", 346), new defensive coordinator Rob Ryan inherits a mess from predecessor Steve Spagnuolo that won't be easily fixed this season. The Saints D finished dead last in DVOA in 2012.

NON-QB MVP

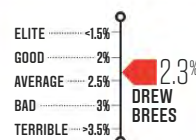
by Pro-Football Reference

A first-team All-Pro for four straight years, RG Jahri Evans didn't allow a sack in '12. His 6'4", 318-pound frame helped the Saints post the NFL's third-best power success rate [71%] on short-yardage runs.



BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



It's hard to knock a guy who threw 43 TDs (best in NFL), but Brees was one of two QBs with 10 bad decision INTs last season. And that was despite getting his historically high BDR somewhat in check [2.3%].

KEEP YOUR COOL

NEW AXE BLACK CHILL

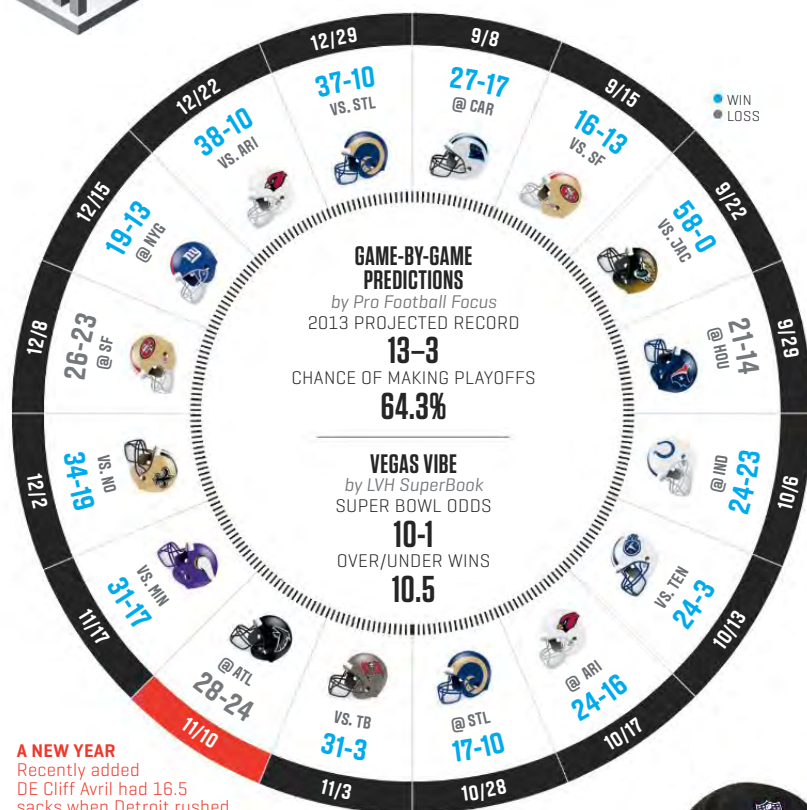


RUB THE CUBE.
GET THE CHILL.





PREVIEW



A NEW YEAR
Recently added
DE Cliff Avril had 16.5 sacks when Detroit rushed four or fewer the past two seasons. Seattle had two sacks after Week 14 (zero vs. Atlanta in playoffs) in the same set.

NFC WEST

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

NO PERCY, NO PROBLEM. WILSON'S MISTAKE-FREE PLAY LIFTS HAWKS.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

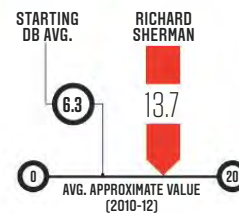
by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE 7
DEFENSE 9

Percy Harvin will miss most of the year, but the Seahawks were fourth in offensive DVOA without him last season. Marshawn Lynch (1,592 yards, 11 TDs) was our second most valuable RB in 2012. The biggest question with the D: With Bruce Irvin suspended and Chris Clemons coming off an ACL tear, will the Seahawks have enough pass rush to repeat their No. 3 rank in pass defense DVOA?

NON-QB MVP

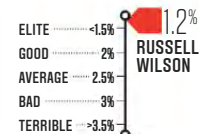
by Pro-Football Reference



In 2012 **Richard Sherman** led all DBs in AV (18), tied for second in INTs (8) and had the eighth-best success rate on pass targets (61%). And yet his cap hit was \$511K. Come on, Seattle, pay the man!

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Wilson (1.2% BDR) didn't make a bad decision in his last eight games. A little context: The best QBs tend to make an error once every three games. Wilson has a chance to dethrone Tom Brady as BDR king.



NFC WEST

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

WILLIS & CO. HAVE THE GOODS FOR A RETURN TRIP TO THE SUPER BOWL.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

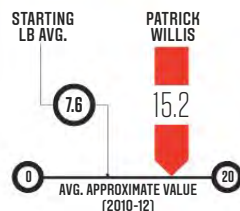
by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE 8
DEFENSE 7

All four starters from the NFL's best linebacker corps return to San Francisco, but whether or not the 49ers defense will register a third straight season in our top three depends largely on the health of DE Justin Smith (triceps). Back-to-back 1,200-yard seasons—and Colin Kaepernick's running the read-option—have revitalized RB Frank Gore (No. 4 rushing DVOA in 2012).

NON-QB MVP

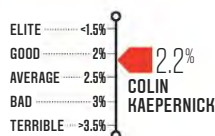
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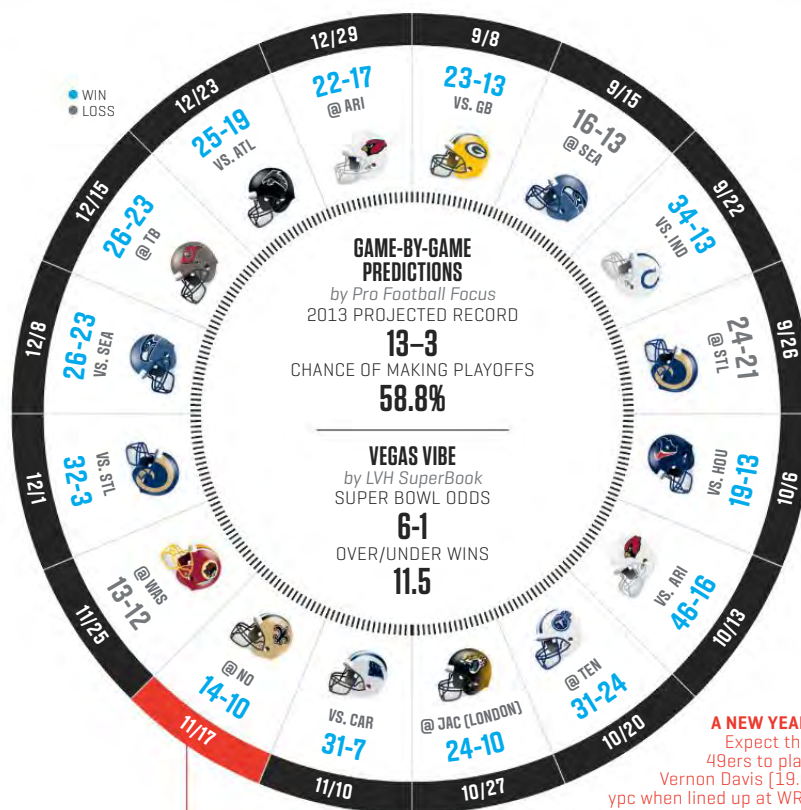
The best LB the past half-decade, **Patrick Willis** has averaged 137 tackles per season in his NFL career. He's no pushover vs. the pass either. His 4.3 ypa allowed was fourth among LBs in 2012.

BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Kaepernick (2.2% BDR) threw the NFL's fewest INTs in 2012 (3), but five defenders dropped potential picks, and WR Randy Moss broke up 3 INTs. Don't be shocked if CK posts double-digit picks this season.

**A NEW YEAR**

Expect the 49ers to play Vernon Davis (19.0 ypc when lined up at WR) in the slot a lot vs. the Saints, whom he torched for 147 yards on such plays in the 2011 playoffs.



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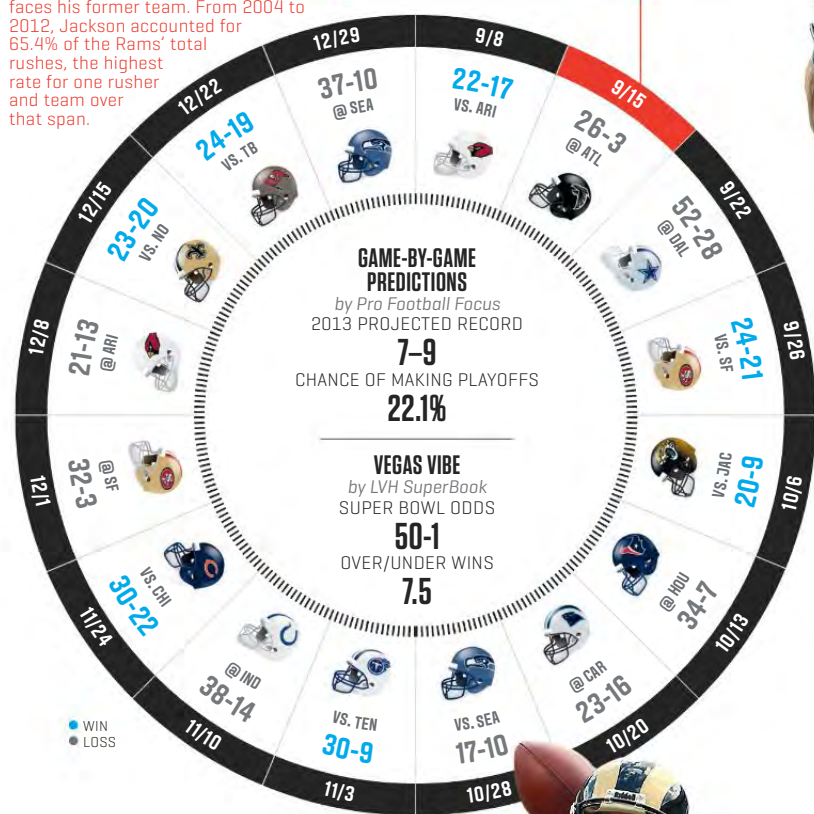
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A NEW YEAR Falcons RB Steven Jackson faces his former team. From 2004 to 2012, Jackson accounted for 65.4% of the Rams' total rushes, the highest rate for one rusher and team over that span.



NFC WEST ST. LOUIS RAMS

A REGRESSING D AND REBUILDING O.
WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE?

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

OFFENSE **29**
DEFENSE **23**

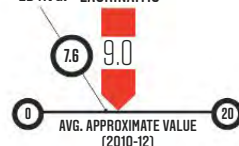
NON-QB MVP

by Pro-Football Reference

The Rams offense ranked 21st in our metrics last season, and that was before the team let Jackson and WR Danny Amendola walk. First-round WR Tavon Austin [10.4 yards per touch at West Virginia in 2012] will give QB **Sam Bradford** a much-needed weapon. But to get into the playoff hunt, St. Louis' D will have to avoid a likely regression after improving from 21st to seventh and having the third-fewest adjusted games lost in 2012.

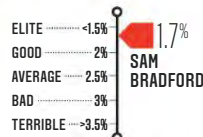
A big reason the Rams' rush D ranked 10th in DVOA: Laurinaitis hardly ever leaves the field. He hasn't missed a game in four seasons and is by far the league's leading solo tackler [427] since 2009.

STARTING LB AVG. **JAMES LAURINAITIS**



BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Forget Austin, the most vital signee for Bradford [1.7% BDR] is ex-Titans TE Jared Cook, who can flex wide or line up tight. Only one of Bradford's 24 INTs/near INTs in 2012 was on a throw to an in-line TE.



PREVIEW



NFC WEST

ARIZONA CARDINALS

UH, MR. PETERSON, YOUR THUMB IS POINTING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION.

UNIT PROJECTIONS

by Football Outsiders

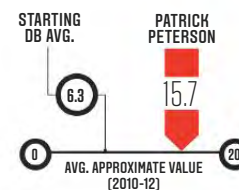
OFFENSE **22**
DEFENSE **18**

The 2012 Cardinals featured the worst run blocking we've ever measured, so even if first-round G Jonathan Cooper improves the D-line, it's still in sorry shape. The bright side: Competent QB play should revitalize WR Larry Fitzgerald, whose percentage of Cards receptions has dropped from 32% to 21% since 2011. CB **Patrick Peterson**, leader of last season's No. 2 pass D, will need to adjust to three new starters and coordinator Todd Bowles.

NON-QB MVP

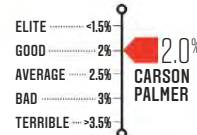
by Pro-Football Reference

Peterson's punt-returning skills made him an All-Pro as a rookie, but he has evolved into a shut-down corner. In 2012 he had 7 INTs and denied opponents on 59% of targets [11th in NFL].

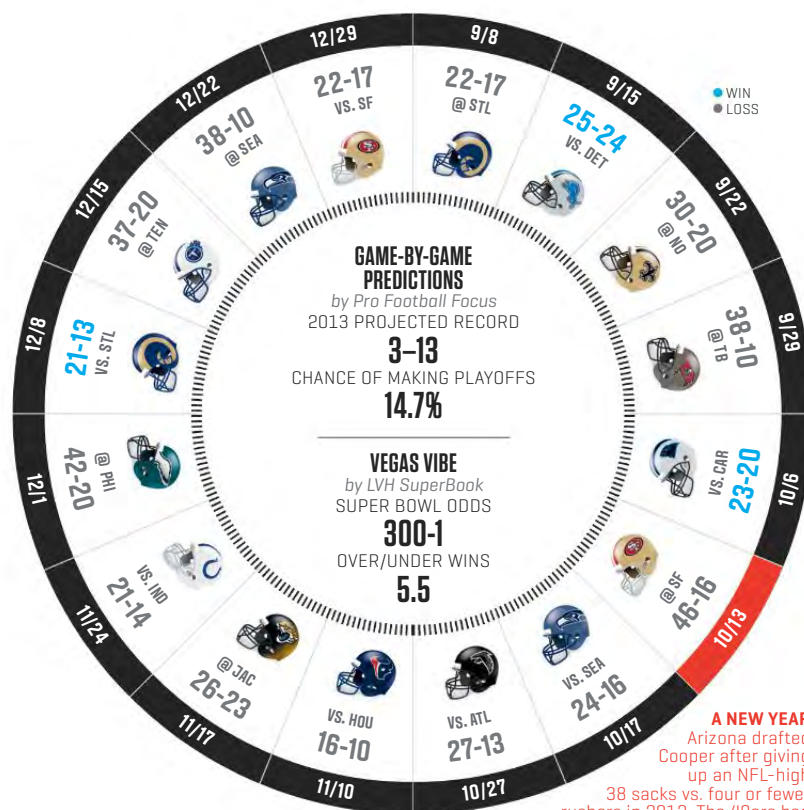


BAD DECISION RATE

by KC Joyner



Palmer has a risk-taking reputation, but his 2% BDR last year was nearly equal to that of Aaron Rodgers [1.8%]. He won't make many unnecessary throws in Bruce Arians' vertical offense.



A NEW YEAR
Arizona drafted Cooper after giving up an NFL-high 38 sacks vs. four or fewer rushers in 2012. The 49ers had 36 sacks with a standard pass rush last season [second in NFL].

THE DRINK THAT DOESN'T COMPROMISE SALUTES THOSE WHO
NEVER COMPROMISE
WHEN WATCHING FOOTBALL
AFTER ALL, MAN HAS ALWAYS LOVED WATCHING STUFF



REVEAL
KNOWLEDGE



2013 AD

Armed with real coke taste & zero compromise,
man enjoys all of his football marathons.

enjoyeverything



14,000,000,000 BC

The universe somehow begins, creating an infinite amount of stuff for man to one day look at.

600,000,000 BC

The eyeball begins to take shape and eventually becomes man's preferred body part for watching stuff.

1,000,000 BC

Prehistoric man spends hours watching fire. Meanwhile, prehistoric girlfriend hunts, gathers and advances mankind.

650,000 BC

Ice Age man watches glaciers slowly move. Despite lack of action, man discovers love of watching things for long periods of time.

A COMPLETE HISTORY OF MAN WATCHING STUFF (WHEN HE SHOULD BE DOING OTHER STUFF)



2584 BC

Ancient Egyptian man watches pyramids being built instead of idolizing cats.

264 BC

Roman man finds excitement in watching gladiator battles. Doesn't notice crumbling empire.

1066 AD

Medieval man watches medieval jousts instead of fetching medieval water.

1608 AD

Renaissance man discovers stuff to look at that is millions of miles away.



1865 AD

Wild West man watches sheriff and outlaw duel. Learns to root for home team.

1929 AD

Whale watching man watches whales.

1996 AD

Digital age man creates high-definition and digital surround sound to romance man's eyeballs and earballs.

2005 AD

Soda scientists invent perfect drink for uncompromised sports watching.

2013 AD

Modern man chooses to watch football over chores every Saturday and Sunday. Also Monday. Sometimes Thursday.

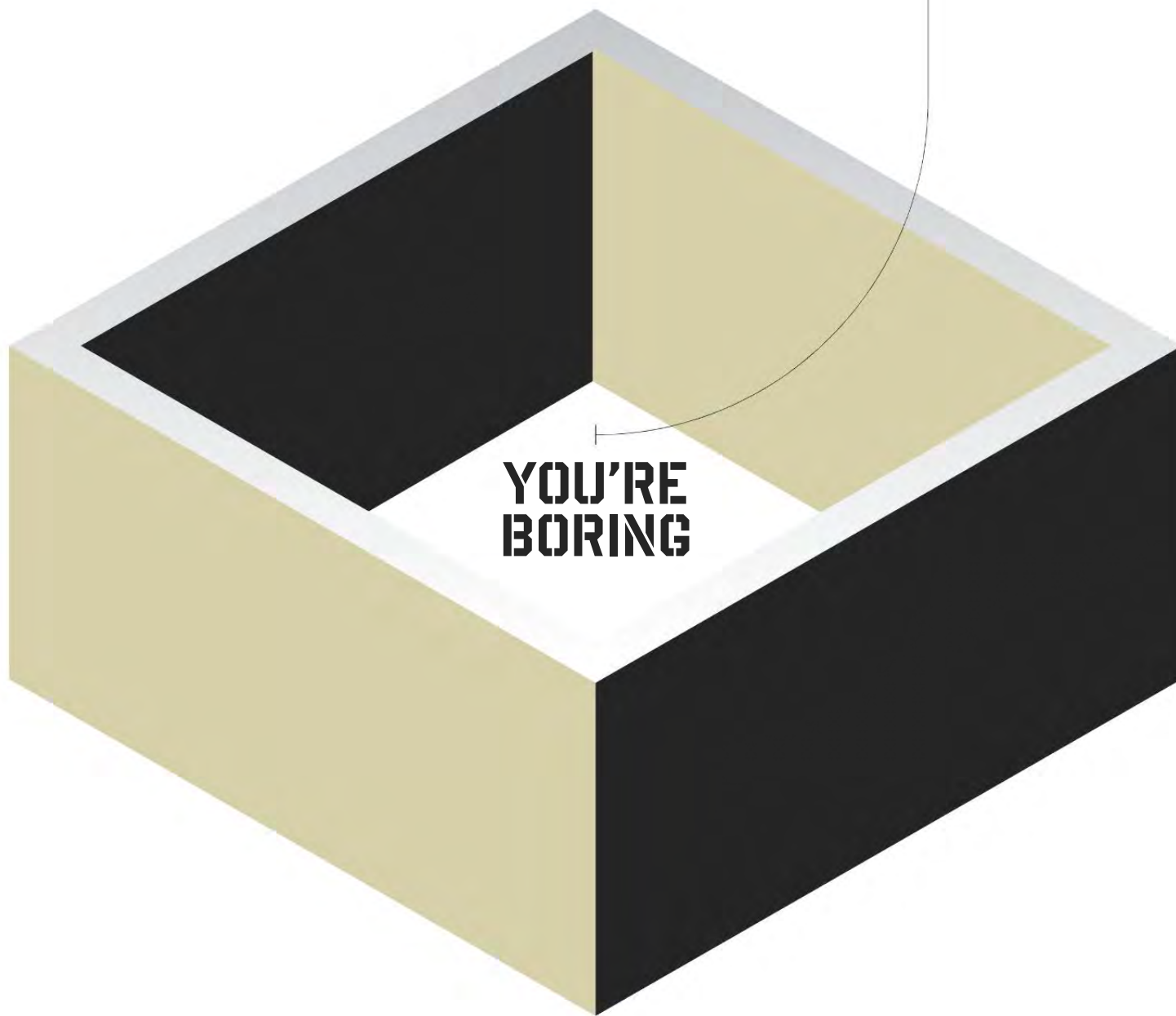


NFL YESTERDAY
Defense wins championships

PREVIEW

NFL TODAY
Going deep wins championships

**JOE
FLACCO
THINKS**



**YOU'RE
BORING**

FIERY. OUTSPOKEN. INNOVATIVE. THE **RAVENS QB** KNOWS HE'S NONE OF THESE THINGS.
BUT WHAT MAKES HIM SEEM ORDINARY ACTUALLY MAKES HIM SPECIAL.

BY KEVIN VAN VALKENBURG





JOHN HARBAUGH HAD SEEN ENOUGH. IT WAS A COLD AND WINDY JANUARY NIGHT IN GILLETTE STADIUM, AND HIS RAVENS WERE ON TRACK TO CEDE THE AFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME TO THE PATRIOTS FOR THE SECOND STRAIGHT YEAR. THAT THEY WERE MERELY TRAILING 13-7 AS THE FIRST HALF ENDED WAS A GIFT, IN LIGHT OF THE TEAM'S PLODDING AND CONSERVATIVE PLAY.

The coach yanked off his headset and marched toward the locker room, jaw clenched, chin leading the way. When he's in that mood, his players would rather lower their shoulders and take on a 250-pound fullback than lock eyes with their boss. But one Raven dared to stare him down: Joe Flacco. And after the two men exchanged glances, they nodded in agreement. For the entirety of Flacco's five-year NFL career, they'd been having the same debate. What kind of team do we want to be? What's our identity? When do we decide it's on the quarterback, not the defense, to get us to the Super Bowl? In that moment, in that one shared look, the debate was over. "I think we all realized," Harbaugh recalls, "that it was time."

The coach marched into the locker room and straight to the leaders of Baltimore's defense, players with big personalities and bigger egos, some future inhabitants of the Hall of Fame.

Harbaugh did not need their permission for what he was about to do, but he did want Ray Lewis, Ed Reed and Terrell Suggs to hear it from him first.

Here is the deal! All second half, we're cutting loose on offense. We're going to spread them out, run no-huddle, attack on every play. I'm putting the ball in Joe's hands. He's going to win the game for us. Let's go!

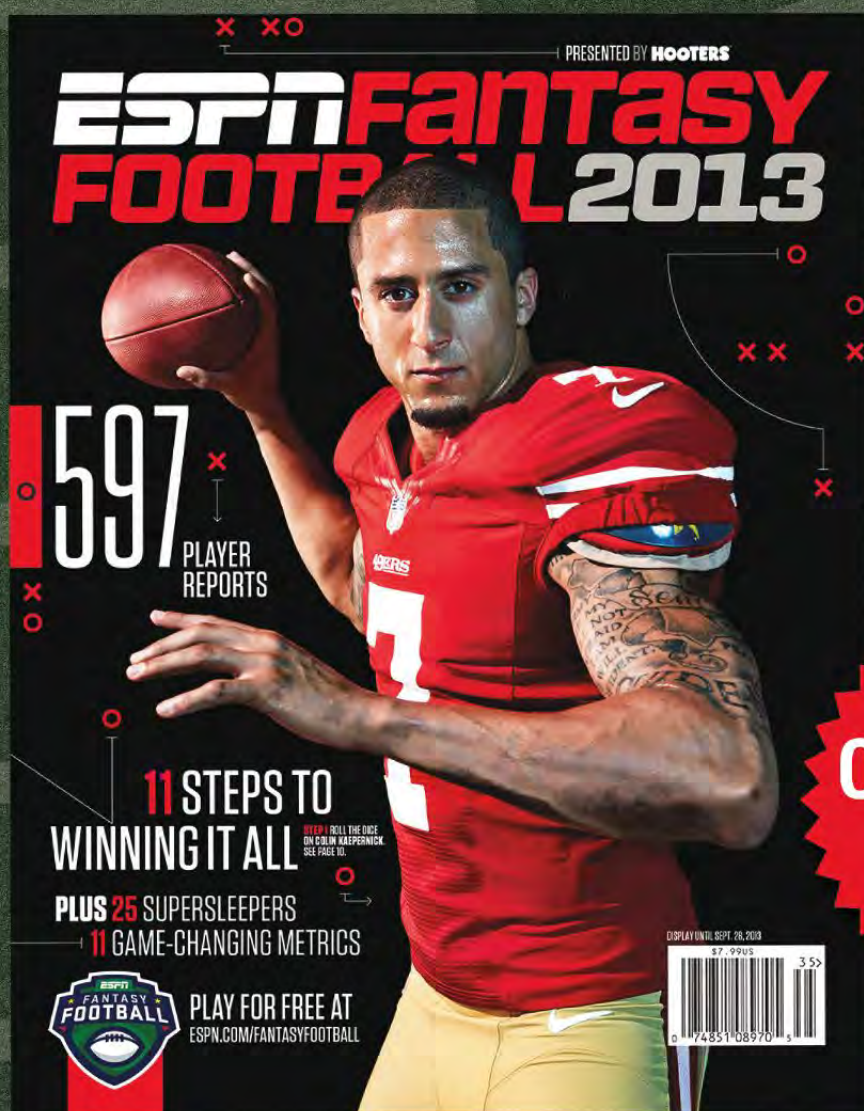
The defense erupted in approval. Harbaugh then shared the news with the offense, and the energy inside the locker room surged even more—Flacco's teammates had been waiting for this moment too.

And so in the second half a new era of Ravens football began. There was Flacco, rushing his team to the line of scrimmage, barking out audibles from the shotgun, controlling the game's ebb and flow. And with one razor-sharp throw after another, the quarterback carved Bill Belichick's defense apart—a perfect fade to Anquan Boldin; a frozen rope to Dennis Pitta; a back-shoulder arrow to Torrey Smith; a skinny post to Boldin; Pitta, again, over the middle.

The Ravens scored 21 unanswered points on three touchdown throws by Flacco. When he walked off the field up 28-13 with 2:11 remaining, he made a beeline for Harbaugh, a playful smirk on his face. He gave him a shove, then another. Harbaugh grinned, planted two hands on Flacco's chest and drove him backward in

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URNS OUT, JOE REALLY CAN THROW

The reigning Super Bowl MVP may have a reputation as a hand-it-off kind of guy (an easy thing to be when your backs are Ray Rice and Bernard Pierce). But over the past five playoffs, Flacco actually ranks highest among QBs in airing it out.

JOE FLACCO	12.91
BEN ROETHLISBERGER	12.33
AARON RODGERS	11.98
PEYTON MANNING	11.27
DREW BREES	11.22
TOM BRADY	11.02

AVERAGE YARDS PER COMPLETION, PLAYOFFS (2008-12)*

* minimum 200 pass attempts

mock anger. Flacco came at Harbaugh one last time, grabbing him by the collar as if he might slam his coach to the turf. Both men laughed.

The entire interaction lasted under 10 seconds. But it was years in the making.

AT AGE 28, Flacco is among only seven starting quarterbacks in the league with a Super Bowl ring, but there isn't another player in the NFL whose supporters and detractors are further apart in their assessments. (Eli Manning probably comes the closest.) Those who see Flacco as the prototypical winner cite the fact that he's been under center for 63 victories (including the playoffs) over his first five years in the league, the most to start a career in the Super Bowl era. But his critics find it hard to believe he did anything other than ride Ray Lewis' coattails.

And that's just the beginning of the bile thrown Flacco's way. He's been called a flake, a choker, an overrated game manager and a Sesame Street character (owing to his resemblance to Bert). People have made fun of his eyebrows, haircut, inconsistency, cliché-heavy news conferences and goofy wedding photos. But in the end, the most frequent jab fired at Flacco is that he's just ... so ... boring.

It's a common misconception, albeit an understandable one. Part of it comes down to numbers: Flacco has never thrown for 4,000 yards or 30 TDs in a season, and he's never been ranked in the top 10 in yards per attempt. Analytics experts have constructed entire mathematical theorems to argue he's the very definition of average. When Flacco signed a \$120.6 million contract in the offseason, briefly making him the game's highest-paid player, *The Onion* joked that Aaron Rodgers now needed \$989 trillion to reflect his true market value.

But the boring label is not just a reflection of his playing style, of course. Flacco is a type-B personality in a type-A profession, a distinction that makes him not only unique at his position but oddly disquieting. A few years ago, then-offensive coordinator Cam Cameron approached Flacco the night before a big game.

He had a proposal: *How about you get up in front of the offense tonight and give us a fiery speech, the kind Ray Lewis gives to the defense? I think this is your night to get us going.* Flacco looked at him as if he'd just proposed swimming naked across Chesapeake Bay.

"That's not me," Flacco says. "I love Ray, and I love how he always spoke from the heart, but if you listened to those speeches, a lot of them didn't even make sense. He meant everything he was saying, but I didn't know what he was talking about 90% of the time."

Ravens tight end Dennis Pitta, one of Flacco's closest friends, says: "It takes a lot to get to know Joe. When you first meet him, you might think, Joe doesn't really like me, and he's kind of rude. But it's just because he's shy. He's not a very outgoing person."

Away from the fishbowl of fame, Flacco is dry-humored and sarcastic. And he can be surprisingly self-aware, willing to poke fun at his own reputation. Asked once if he'd ever agree to star in a reality show about his life—he's the father of one (with another on the way) who married his high school sweetheart and spends most Friday nights eating pizza with his parents and grandparents—Flacco deadpanned, *Sounds like the most boring reality show of all time.*

"You think I'm boring? I think that's cool," Flacco says. "I don't know if I'm an everyday person, but I don't think I'm an a—hole. If you think I'm boring, I don't see why it's a negative thing. All I've ever wanted was to be respected within the building."

That's something all quarterbacks say, even as they privately throw tantrums. But Flacco really doesn't care what anyone outside the Ravens organization thinks. A few years ago, a Baltimore sports-talk-radio host asked him where he thought he ranked among the league's quarterbacks. When he replied that it was important for him to believe he was the NFL's best, his comments were virally mocked. "I guess I should have said, 'You know what? I think I'm the 20th best,'" Flacco says now with a shrug. "That's exactly what you want to hear

from your quarterback, right?"

It's perhaps not surprising to learn that growing up in Audubon, N.J., the player he longed to emulate was Niners quarterback Joe Montana. Classy, reserved, confident and respected. And when he retired, he gave his life back to his family. To Flacco, it almost seems as if Montana belongs to a different era. No one ever questioned his leadership or complained that he didn't scream at his receivers when they dropped catchable passes. Flacco doesn't understand why the fact that he has a similar mentality is cited as one of his shortcomings.

"Look at Peyton [Manning]," Flacco says. "He has guys on eggshells all the time. If they do the wrong thing, they're thinking, 'S—, he's going to kill me.' And that works for him. But at the same time, I think it's tough to play in that environment. Sure, if you're not consistently putting in the effort, that's when I'm going to call you out. But if you're putting in a full effort and you do something that costs us the game, what the f— is yelling going to do? The game's over. Let's move on and get better."

FLACCO'S BACKSTORY IS both improbable and explains so much about how he's wired. His father, Steve, a mortgage broker, is all of 5'11". His mother, Karen, a stay-at-home mom, is 5'6". Yet somehow Joe, the oldest of six kids, grew to be 6'6". And thanks to the bazooka dangling from his right shoulder, he became the best football player that tiny Audubon has ever seen.

Even if his folks hadn't raised him to be humble, his experience at the University of Pittsburgh, where he got stuck behind Tyler Palko on the depth chart, would have beaten it into him. After Flacco transferred to Delaware in 2005 and began setting passing records, he still seemed unaware of what possibilities the future might hold. Prior to his senior year, he told his coach, K.C. Keeler, that he was interested in playing baseball for the Blue Hens in the spring. Keeler was flabbergasted, informing him that NFL scouts were already calling, asking if they could come watch practices. You have a chance to be a first-round pick, Keeler



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told him. Flacco seemed taken aback.

The Ravens ended up grabbing him with the 18th pick in the 2008 draft, but they weren't sure what they had at first. Cameron was confident that Flacco's flawless mechanics, big arm and huge hands would help him succeed in the wind and cold of AFC North games. But he didn't want to put him on the field as a rookie; Flacco barely knew how to take a snap from center after playing in the shotgun most of his career at Delaware. In the end, the team had no choice: After the two quarterbacks ahead of him on the depth chart, Kyle Boller and Troy Smith, were set back by injury and illness, the rookie was the only QB left standing.

Soon enough, a meme that has dogged Flacco throughout his career was born: *The defense doesn't trust him*. He quickly hit rough waters—one touchdown, seven interceptions in his first five games. Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs voiced his frustrations during a midseason radio interview. "I think [Flacco] is all right," Suggs said. "But like I said, in the end, Troy should be the starter. He's the better man for the job." Flacco rebounded to help Baltimore sneak into the AFC championship game, only to throw three interceptions in a loss to the Steelers at Heinz Field.

In his second season, the contours of the debate that consumed Flacco and his coach began to take shape. How do you change the philosophy of a franchise, especially one that's winning? "Joe's first few years in the league, he wasn't able to showcase everything he had," says Pitta. "A big part of that is because this is the Ravens. We were built on defense. That was the philosophy: Limit mistakes, control the ball, let the defense win the game."

Flacco's extremes *were* maddening as recently as 2011. He slayed Pittsburgh with three touchdowns, then threw two interceptions in a road loss to a bad Titans team. He carved up Houston with Brady-like precision, then looked lost and confused the next week in an embarrassing loss to Jacksonville. Columnists started to question his intelligence and lack of fire. *The Baltimore Sun* even suggested, in 2011, that the Ravens hold a quarterback competition and let over-the-hill vet Marc Bulger try to win the starting job—failing to



"I LOVE RAY, AND I LOVE HOW HE ALWAYS SPOKE FROM THE HEART. BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT 90% OF THE TIME."

consider how Bulger would handle Lewis' screaming that they should have run the ball every time he threw a pick.

"The whole *Why can't you just play safe?* philosophy, I don't think those guys would ever outwardly put it that way," Flacco says. "But the overall sense of the program, there was a little bit of that. The defense felt like they had the kind of ability that they did in 2000, and that wasn't necessarily the truth. My point was: That's not going to give you the best odds of winning. You might be able to pull it off now and then, but I don't think they'd won more than one playoff game from the time they won the Super Bowl in 2000 to the time I got there. So we obviously needed to take another step."

HARBAUGH IS NOT annoyed, or even surprised, when some of Flacco's quotes are read to him on the eve of training camp. He's leaning forward in a chair as he listens, elbows pressed to his knees, half smiling. Harbaugh is a football lifer, raised in the game by his father, Jack, another football lifer. His greatest strength as a head coach isn't X's and O's, it's always been how well he understands the complex cauldron of locker room egos and emotions, abilities and ambitions.

It's true, Harbaugh says, there were plenty of times early in his career when Flacco wanted to push the ball downfield, take more chances, make mistakes and not get grounded after every interception. It's also true that the

defense, which for years was the home to every alpha dog in the Ravens' locker room, was slow to accept that the NFL is all about offense now. But in Harbaugh's mind, the real story behind Flacco's first five years in the NFL isn't what he could have accomplished had the Ravens opened up their offense sooner; it was Flacco's willingness to adapt his game depending on Baltimore's week-to-week approach.

"To suggest Joe has been on some great teams and we've won in spite of him, or regardless of how he played, is absolutely false," Harbaugh says.

The moments that speak volumes about Flacco's strengths, the coach thinks, aren't any a Ravens diehard would likely volunteer. For starters, he cites a 33-14 playoff win in 2009 over the Patriots in Foxborough, a game frequently cited by Flacco's critics as a perfect example of his irrelevance. The QB was just 4-of-10 for 34 yards that day, as the Ravens rushed for 234 yards and four TDs. What most people don't realize, Harbaugh says, is that Flacco's hip was so badly bruised that half his thigh was the color of an eggplant. Late in the game, however, with New England threatening to creep back into the contest, Flacco dropped back on third and seven, saw no one open, then scrambled for his life, extending the ball over the marker at the last second as a defender closed in on him. First down. "That is one of the greatest examples of why he's a winning quarterback," Harbaugh says. "People point to



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PLAY-BY-PLAY

A / The Ravens' season was circling the drain. This is what most people remember about their AFC divisional playoff game against the Broncos on Jan. 12, as they tried to rally while down 35-28 with 1:09 left. What the Ravens perhaps remember most: the freeze. It was the coldest home playoff game (13 degrees) in Denver history, and the heaters on the Ravens' sideline didn't work for most of it.

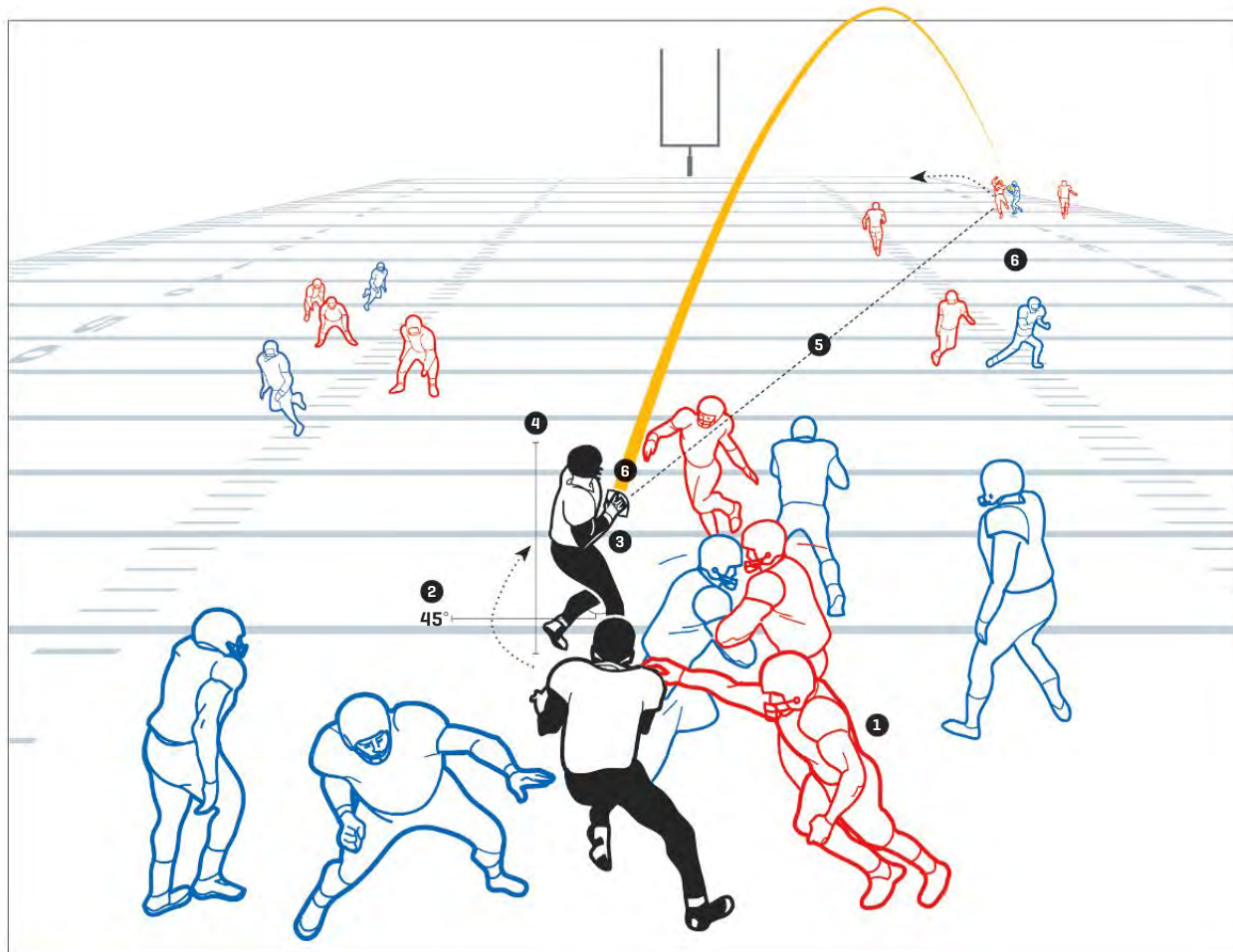
B / On a third-and-three from the Baltimore 30, Jacoby Jones heard Joe Flacco bark out the code for "ALL GOs!" as he rushed to the line of scrimmage. "As I lined up, I was looking at the safety [Rahim Moore], thinking, Man, this guy is shallow. I might be able to get behind him," Jones says. "I came off the ball with everything I had, then I saw he got kind of flushed to his left, and I slowed up for a second. Then I thought, Whoa, Joe really might throw me this thing."

C / After being pressured by Elvis Dumervil and Robert Ayers, Flacco stepped up in the pocket to avoid being sandwiched. While drifting to his left, he launched the ball 50 yards to his right. Yes, Moore took a terrible angle to the ball, coming underneath it. "But the only people who think that throw was luck are the haters," Jones says. "It was a rainbow, but it just kept going. The man's arm strength is ridiculous." Jones corralled the ball and sprinted untouched into the end zone, allowing the Ravens to win the game in double OT—and rewriting the book on Flacco's big-play rep.

THE MILE-HIGH MIRACLE

BY SPORT SCIENCE

It took an improbable throw at a crazy angle and the help of Colorado's thin mountain air to deliver the moment when the Ravens truly became Joe Flacco's team.



METRIC-BY-METRIC

1 / PASS RUSH

At the snap, DE Robert Ayers split the blockers and got a hand on Joe Flacco's right arm but for **less than 0.15 of a second**—not enough time to disrupt his throw or his focus.

2 / ANGLE

Although Flacco turned his shoulders toward Jacoby Jones, there was a **45-degree difference** between his momentum, pulling him left, and his target down the right sideline.

3 / TIMING

It took Flacco **0.32 of a second** from the time he planted his right foot until he released the pass. The average release time for an NFL QB is **0.40 of a second**.

4 / HEIGHT

Flacco's height (6'6") and estimated standing reach of more than **8½ feet** helped the pass clear the reach of onrushing line-backer Von Miller.

5 / DISTANCE

Flacco's pass flew **57.5 yards—2.9 yards** of that due to Denver's altitude. At sea level, the same throw almost certainly would have been knocked down by Rahim Moore.

6 / SPEED

52.6 mph The initial release velocity of Flacco's pass. **18.1 mph** Jones' top speed as he accelerated from the 40- to the 30-yard line.

that game like he should be embarrassed because he only completed four passes. But Joe chases wins. He doesn't force things. He throws balls away to keep us in games."

Doesn't force things? Throws balls away? To Flacco's critics, that just bolsters their argument that his job wasn't to win games, but to not lose them. By 2011, even though the Ravens came within a last-second Lee Evans bobble of reaching the Super Bowl, Flacco had earned the derision of every stats guru and had become

the butt of jokes in countless fantasy leagues for his reliably mediocre numbers.

The issue of who or what was holding him back is still a touchy subject for anyone on the Ravens. Privately, Flacco pushed for more control. Publicly, he backed the company line, but the debate over when he would be able to cut loose was getting tense. And Flacco's relationship with Cameron, the man who had fought to draft him, had become visibly strained at times.

"Our relationship was good, he was just a tough person to communicate with," Flacco says now, carefully choosing his words. "When you don't feel like you can communicate at a great level, obviously there are going to be times when you see things differently."

A contract dispute at the beginning of the 2012 season, when Flacco turned down a \$90 million deal, didn't help. "I felt, Am I your guy or am I not?" he says. "Because if I'm your guy, you're going to end up paying me anyway. I'm

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not getting cheaper. You should pay me now or it's going to cost you if I win a Super Bowl."

Seems like a shrewd move now, but it sure didn't seem like it when the Ravens lost two straight games toward the end of the 2012 season. Finally, Harbaugh decided it was time to act. Firing Cameron was the most agonizing moment of his career as a head coach. Cameron had hired Harbaugh as an assistant at Indiana University in 1997. He owed a lot to Cameron. But now he saw the offensive arms race in the NFL and the gray in the hair of Lewis and Reed, and he felt the team needed a new spark. "Something needed to be shaken up," he says. "Cam recognized that." With just three games left in 2012, Cameron was replaced on an interim basis by Jim Caldwell, who, rather than rewrite the Ravens' playbook, simply emphasized the passing plays already in it.

Flacco responded with a shaky performance in a loss against the Broncos, then went on the hottest streak of his career. In his next five games, excluding a meaningless regular-season finale, Flacco completed 60% of his passes for 1,449 yards, 13 touchdowns and no interceptions under Caldwell. After Flacco's breakout performance in the playoff win over the Patriots, Harbaugh named Caldwell the permanent offensive coordinator for 2013.

Is it possible that Flacco was capable of this all along? It's hard for him, looking back, not to view it that way. "I wish we'd been more willing to take risks," he says. "We were never willing to fail to get better. We always played safe. And we won, but we didn't really get better. I had no margin for error. I'd love to throw 40 touchdown passes a year. But I didn't even have a chance to do that."

THE NEW SEASON hasn't even officially started, and already questions about Flacco have begun again. That night in New Orleans when Flacco sliced up the 49ers defense with the precision of a chef dicing onions has faded from memory. It's not Flacco's pinpoint accuracy that most people remember from the Super Bowl, or the bombs he threw to Boldin over the middle on third down, or even that he was the MVP. It's Colin Kaepernick and the way he seemed to invent new angles every time he ran, terrifying



Flacco is the first QB from an FCS school to win a Super Bowl since Kurt Warner in 1999.

the Ravens defense with his feet and arm. Flacco won the game, but Kaepernick became the face of the NFL.

And now that Pitta, Flacco's favorite third-down target, is done for the season with a dislocated hip and Boldin was traded to the Niners, the haters have returned too. "He's never made anyone else better," one national columnist recently wrote. The difference this time is that Flacco has his teammates from the other side of the ball to back him up. "He doesn't have to do any talking," says Suggs, who has become the QB's fiercest defender the past two years. "All he has to do is flash his ring."

Flacco too has evolved, albeit in his own way. That lanky, awkward kid the Ravens drafted has become a weight room regular. Shake his hand these days and you could almost mistake him for a Baltimore stevedore or a bouncer at a Federal Hill corner bar. There is a swagger to him this year that wasn't apparent in previous seasons. He's been verbally sparring with Suggs during scrimmages; he's been more at ease with the media's endless questions about his leadership.

"He seems more confident to me," says Ravens cornerback Lardarius Webb. "He's jawing a little more. He's making some throws he wouldn't usually try before this year, and he's putting it in there." He even agreed to portray Johnny Unitas in a biopic about the Baltimore Colts quarterback that began filming this summer. "I'm only in the action scenes," Flacco says. "There's no way I would have agreed to do it if they said I had to act."

Make no mistake: It's Flacco's team now. Away from a microphone, he'll even concede this. Something changed during that playoff run, particularly that night in New England. He's not a fan of simple narratives, the notion

that one player must lead while others follow. But with Lewis in retirement and Reed wearing a Texans uniform, he knows all eyes will be on him when the seas get rough. The new contract has obviously changed people's expectations. Outside pressure will be enormous. And he likes it that way.

Hours after signing the contract that guaranteed him at least \$52 million, he celebrated by pulling into a McDonald's drive-thru in Aberdeen, Md. He ordered a 10-piece Chicken McNugget meal with fries and iced tea. "I can't really complain," Flacco says. "We won last year, I'm going to get a lot of money, and we're going to win football games. That's the way it works around here. We're not going to apologize for acting like a good football team. We don't care if that comes with pressure or not."

For now, Flacco is expecting that the new, wide-open offense will carry into 2013 and that he will get to throw more than he ever has. But that doesn't mean the debate is dead. Should he throw a few picks, it's easy to imagine the game plan calling for Ray Rice and Bernard Pierce to run the ball 30 times. In which case Flacco would go back to sliding for third downs, sitting on leads, grinding out the clock and throwing the ball away. He wouldn't be thrilled, but the Ravens would trust that he'd do whatever they ask of him to win.

So let the world continue to be dazzled by the read-option, by the next generation of young, dynamic quarterbacks. And good luck with your fantasy draft. Joe Flacco plans to keep collecting victories, both beautiful and flawed, week after week, regardless of who gets the credit, regardless of how it's done.

Even if it's boring. ■

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NFL YESTERDAY
Three yards and a cloud of dust

PREVIEW

NFL TODAY
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THE **JAGUARS** ARE LEADING AN ANALYTICS BOOM IN THE NFL. AND THEY FINALLY HAVE A HEAD COACH WHO WILL TAKE THE NUMBER CRUNCHERS SERIOUSLY.

BY DAVID FLEMING

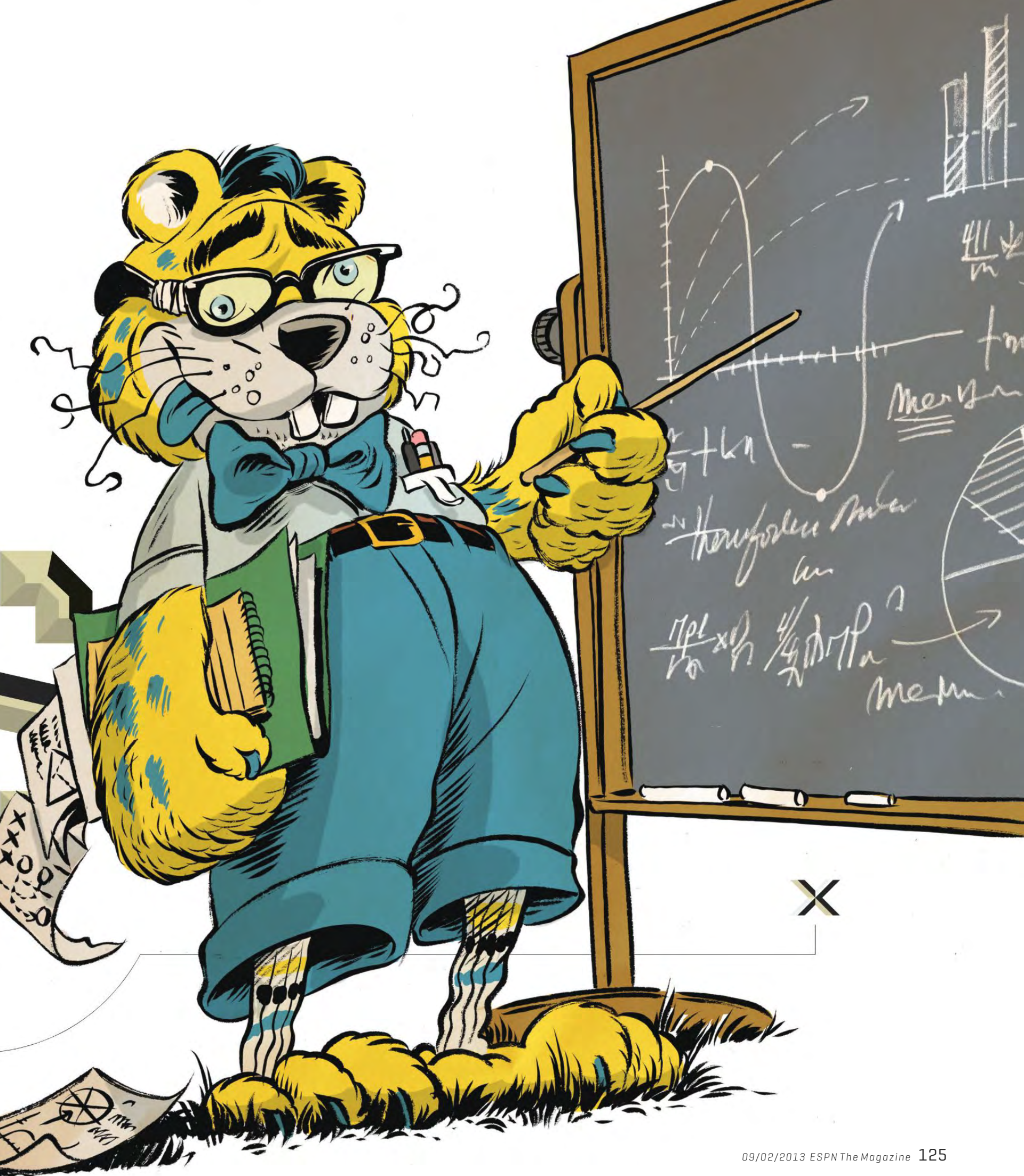
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ZOHAR LAZAR

THE

GEERKS

SHALL INHERIT THE TURF







IT WAS CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT WHEN NEW JAGUARS COACH GUS BRADLEY LEANED FORWARD IN HIS CHAIR AND BROUGHT HIS PALM DOWN TO HIS DESKTOP LIKE A GAVEL. **"LET'S GET TO THE TRUTH,"** HE SAID.

The 2013 NFL draft was six weeks away, and the Jacksonville front office, with the No. 2 pick, had some tough decisions to make, starting with the future of third-year quarterback Blaine Gabbert.

Since the Jags selected him 10th overall in 2011, Gabbert had gone 5–19 as a starter with a passer rating of 70.2, second lowest in the league. Bradley needed to know whether Gabbert, at age 23, was already a lost cause, or whether his lackluster numbers were at least partly a reflection of his less-than-stellar supporting cast. The future of the franchise

hung in the balance, starting with the approach to this year's draft: Take a new quarterback, find help on the defensive front or select an offensive lineman to protect Gabbert?

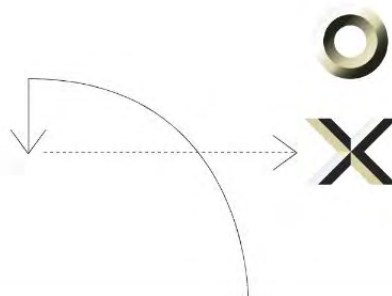
Bradley had watched plenty of tape. He knew the QB's basic stats by heart. He needed more. So before leaving his office that night, he made a decision that would have been cause for leaguewide ridicule just a few years ago: He asked the team's head of analytics, a man barely out of his 20s who had never played football, to uncover the truth about the team's quarterback.

At 5:15 a.m., Tony Khan, the team's senior





The brain trust of (from left) Caldwell, Tony Khan and Shad Khan chose Bradley (opposite) in part because he's open to innovation.



vice president of technology and analytics (and the son of Jags owner Shahid Khan), walked into Bradley's office and placed three handwritten sheets of paper on the coach's desk. Later that morning—once Bradley had deciphered the penmanship and presentation, which had the look of a seventh-grade book report—he began to understand the significance of the data Khan had compiled. This wasn't a grizzled old scout asking him to trust his gut. This wasn't a spreadsheet of stats any fantasy football player could acquire. This was something different, something more. This was the future.

The page titled "Blaine QB Rating Stats" revealed that when adjusted for drops, throwaways and spikes, Gabbert's passer rating in 2012 was a respectable 82.8. The next page, "Blaine Time in the Pocket," detailed the Jags' woeful pass protection: The line gave Gabbert an average of just 2.56 seconds to throw the ball. When he had more than 2.6 seconds to throw, his QB rating jumped to 84.5. The final page, "Blaine Under Pressure," showed that when facing a six-man rush, Gabbert ranked

first among QBs in completion percentage.

Bradley was convinced that Gabbert deserved another shot. Six weeks later the Jags used the second pick in the draft to upgrade his protection, selecting Texas A&M offensive tackle Luke Joeckel.

THE ROOKIE HEAD COACH had asked for the truth about his young quarterback; what he received was nothing less than a referendum on the current state of analytics in the NFL. Next-level metrics have long been an integral part of major league baseball and, more recently, the NBA. Yet the NFL has been slow to catch on because of a general resistance to technology combined with the subjective nature of the sport.

At the heart of baseball is a one-on-one battle—pitcher vs. batter—that allows for easy collection of clean, accurate, predictive data. In football, though, there are 22 moving parts on each play, along with an infinite number of

variables, including score, field position and down and distance. STATS LLC, one of the leading analytics companies serving the NFL, tracks 90 separate bits of data in a single play. "There's a ton of information in football," Tony Khan says. "But that's the problem."

Even when it is possible to narrow the parameters of the game using, say, QB rating, the data doesn't show the full story or offer a window into future performance. A wide receiver is only as good as his quarterback. A running back needs an offensive line. A speed pass rusher needs a nose tackle. As former Ravens coach Brian Billick likes to say, "How do you quantify Ray Lewis?"

You can't. But over the past decade, a handful of the NFL's more progressive teams, including the 49ers and Falcons, have been quietly searching for other ways to apply advanced data collection. In 2001 Bill Walsh hired away Paraag Marathe from his job as a financial analyst at Bain & Co. to modernize draft boards for the Niners and study the team's salary cap.



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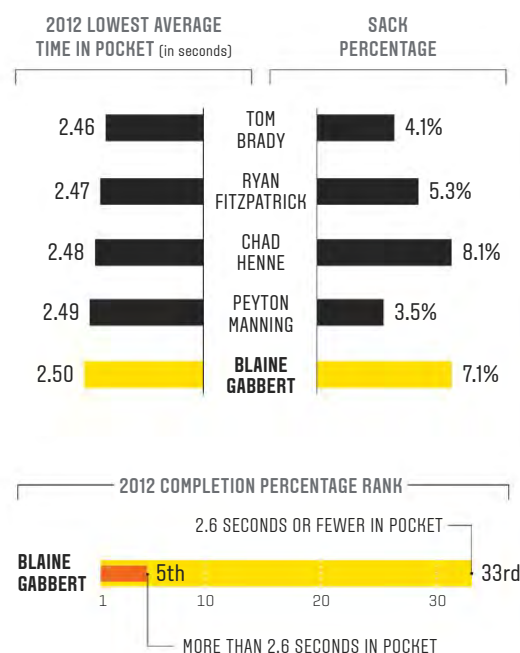


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A LITTLE HELP, PLEASE?

Blaine Gabbert is clearly no Tom Brady or Peyton Manning, QBs who thrive getting rid of the ball quickly. But according to numbers compiled by ESPN Stats & Information, Gabbert might be serviceable with a bit more time to find a receiver.



with the kind of nerd-jock collaboration that usually works only in a John Hughes film. All the number crunching in the world won't be enough to get the talent-starved Jags above .500 this season. But how they fare in Year 1 of the turnaround could go a long way toward determining the future of analytics in football.

"There were times when we all wondered if football would ever get it," says John Pollard, general manager of STATS LLC's Sports

Solutions Group, which provides advanced analytics to more than 20 NFL teams. "Once football grabs ahold of analytics—and that's where we are heading into 2013—it can redefine the sport."

BUT IF THE geeks are to inherit the turf, they first must figure out how to bridge the considerable gap that remains between their computer screens and the football field. When the Redskins front office hired an analytics expert in 2006, coach Joe Gibbs housed him in a separate building away from the football staff and then cut him loose after just seven weeks. Most analytics guys have never stepped foot on a football field or inside a locker room, never felt the reality-warping effect of momentum, chemistry or nerves on the black-and-white data they collect. It's no wonder the word most often used to describe them is "insufferable." Says one member of an NFC front office: "These guys are convinced the data should sell itself. It won't. They either have to learn coachspeak or get used to being ignored."

When first hired, Khan regularly stayed up all night producing detailed analysis of an upcoming opponent's tendencies, only to sit and watch on Sundays as the data came to life on the field—and was ignored by Mularkey and his coaches. Kahn knew they had to change their approach. "If we're sitting in some back room making beautiful statistical models that no one is ever going to use, then we're in big trouble," Adler says. "My job is as much about sales as it is about stats."

To show their desire to bond with—and learn from—the "football guys," Adler and Khan accompanied Bradley, his coaches and Jags scouts to the Senior Bowl, the combine and various pro days. They talked football, drank beer and worked side by side for days at a time. At the Senior Bowl, an excited Adler began explaining to Bradley, who was hired in part because he is receptive to new and progressive ideas, the analytics of fourth-down decisions, clock management, two-point conversions and overtime options. The first-time NFL boss was grateful for the information. But as a joke, he pretended to memorize the spelling of Adler's name on his credential so he could call him out

In 2011, based partially on advanced metrics, the Falcons gave up five picks—two in the first round, one in the second and two in the fourth—to draft explosive wideout Julio Jones. The move was widely panned, but GM Thomas Dimitroff had quietly crunched the numbers and found that less than 15% of fourth-round picks become starters and that Jones' ability to stretch the field and draw double coverage would be exponentially beneficial to the rest of the Falcons offense, especially veteran tight end Tony Gonzalez. In 2010 the Falcons ranked last in the NFL in passes of 25-plus yards with 14. Last year they more than doubled that total with 33.

More than two-thirds of the league's teams are now crunching numbers full time, including the decidedly old-school Bears, who established their own analytics department this summer. One of the notable holdouts? The Steelers. According to an industry source, they've shown "no interest or curiosity in that direction."

Until recently, neither had the Jaguars. In November 2011, Pakistani-born Shahid Khan, an auto-parts manufacturer whom everyone calls Shad, purchased the team for \$760 million. The next summer he hired his son, previously the general manager of a biodiesel plant in Indiana, to build the Jaguars' analytics group from the ground up. Tony Kahn had been interested in advanced metrics since he was in high school and studied finance at the University of Illinois. His first hire was Daniel Adler, who was less than two years out of Harvard, where he majored in economics and served as president of the school's sports analysis collective. Yet even with Khan's pull as the owner's son and Adler's Ivy League credentials, their work initially went largely ignored. But after the 2012 Jags finished 2-14, the worst record in franchise history, Shad Khan fired coach Mike Mularkey and GM Gene Smith, who had been with the team since its inception in 1994. In their places, he hired Bradley, then the defensive coordinator for Pete Carroll's new-age Seahawks, and Dave Caldwell, who, not coincidentally, was the Falcons' director of player personnel under Dimitroff.

Caldwell, 38, and Khan, 30, set out to revive one of the league's most moribund franchises

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in postgame news conferences when the advice didn't work. "It wasn't a complete 180-degree change from the year before, but it was at least 150," says Khan, who spends so much time at EverBank Field that he had a daybed installed in his office and lists the stadium as his home address on his driver's license. "We spent more time interacting with Dave and Gus in those three weeks on the road than we did with our previous staff the entire season."

By the time they got to the combine in Indianapolis, Khan was sitting between Bradley and Caldwell while they interviewed players. As the players talked, the coach and GM would occasionally lean back to scan information on Khan's beat-up iPad before asking a question. When an SEC wide receiver claimed never to have dropped a pass, Caldwell says, Khan waved his finger across his screen, then held it up in the air to contradict him.

That player's chances of playing in Jacksonville were finished, but Khan was just getting started. As the Outland Trophy winner, Joeckel would have been a no-brainer as a No. 2 pick, but the Jags already had a good left tackle, Eugene Monroe. So Khan dug up a Pro Football Focus study indicating that right tackles, Joeckel's likely position in the NFL, were becoming just as important in today's spread-heavy offenses.

To help evaluate defensive backs, Khan created a metric he calls Passes Touched per Target: the number of throws a player intercepted and deflected divided by the number of passes thrown his way. The formula helped confirm that the Jags had found a potential starting cornerback, Connecticut's Dwayne Gratz, in the third round—absurdly late for a starter at that position.

Deeper in the draft, Khan turned to Speed Score, a metric created by Grantland's Bill Barnwell, then of Football Outsiders. The ratio of a player's weight and his 40-yard-dash time is designed to project which college running backs will perform best in the NFL. Barry Sanders had a Speed Score of 110.6, while anything below a 95 is a one-way ticket to the Arena League. Most people saw Michigan quarterback Denard Robinson's best chance of NFL success at wideout. But Jags scouts had other ideas, and



**"THE DATA
WON'T SELL
ITSELF. THESE
GUYS EITHER
HAVE TO LEARN
COACHSPEAK OR
GET USED
TO BEING
IGNORED."**



when Khan plugged Robinson's numbers (200 pounds, with a 4.41 40) into the Speed Score equation, his 105.8 placed him just a tenth of a point below the Miami Hurricanes' Mike James, the second-highest-rated back in the draft by Speed Score. With their fifth-round pick, the Jags selected Robinson, who had coined his own position name: OW, for offensive weapon.

Not even Khan suggests that the Jags' highly rated draft class (Mel Kiper gave it a B+) was the result of analytics alone. But no one denies that having objective data to complement the subjective nature of scouting was an asset. So Khan's contributions solidified his department's value inside the organization, as well as the working relationship between the two sides of the team's brain. "At the end of the day, you still have to scout," says Caldwell. "It's never gonna be like baseball. But there's no question analytics has its place."

THIS SPRING, ANTICIPATING an increased workload, Khan and Adler advertised for summer interns on a handful of sports analytics websites and were shocked to receive more than 100 applications. The team hired four students—from Washington, Iowa State, Princeton and Harvard—who have spent the summer camped out inside the conference room attached to Khan's office. Dressed in Jags swag, they sit elbow to elbow around an oval table covered with spreadsheets, newspapers, soda cups,

A close-up photograph of a grill with glowing red coals. Two large pieces of strip steak are cooking, showing prominent dark grill marks. Several red onions, cut in half and threaded onto wooden skewers, are also grilling around the steaks. The scene is lit with warm, low-key lighting, emphasizing the textures of the meat and vegetables.

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laptops, video remotes and a spaghetti tangle of USB cables, extension cords and chargers.

Seemingly oblivious to time, visitors, nutritional requirements and the smell inside the room (a distinct mélange of Axe, football socks and overheated computer batteries), the interns work with the joyous fervor of undrafted rookie free agents. "All we've ever asked for was an audience," Adler says. "We've got that. Now the challenge isn't to come up with the perfect football stat—that would be impossible and paralyzing—but to challenge the conventional wisdom while maintaining people's trust."

When they aren't busy evaluating draft picks, analyzing game-day strategies and mapping tendencies of the Jags' 2013 opponents, Khan, Adler and team riff on the grand analytical quandaries of the game. At the start of training camp, they debated whether it's easier for running backs to gain yards in an offense with a running quarterback. If so, should that devalue their rushing yards? And by how much?

When members of the Jags' football staff began popping into the room to join the debates or pose queries of their own, Khan and Adler knew they had reached a breakthrough. Football analytics will never reach its full potential if the information moves only from the computers to the field. For the science to flourish, the data has to flow just as freely in the other direction, using the lens of real football expertise and experience to make the numbers infinitely more accurate and useful.

So if Khan's group creates a report measuring defensive ends by sack totals, Caldwell might instruct them to factor in blocking schemes, score and perhaps partial credit for disrupting the quarterback. This interaction helps safeguard against a major problem in the still-fledgling world of football analytics: false confidence. "If we're using 20% of what Tony gives us, I want to figure out how to make that 25%," says Bradley. "If we can understand them a little better and they can understand us a little better, then we can create something really special here."

Before camp started, offensive coordinator Jedd Fisch asked the analytics department about practice schedules: Did the amount of time the team dedicated each day to individual game situations correlate to how frequently



they come up in actual games? For example, were they burning 20% of their practice time on fourth-and-goal when it occurs only 1% of the time in games?

In his hands a few weeks later, Fisch had a report detailing every NFL play of the past five seasons. The first thing he noticed was the frequency, and importance, of second-and-long, a game situation that is often overlooked. So Fisch adjusted his planning, hoping to improve tempo, efficiency and performance.

Problem was, early in camp the execution at practice wasn't matching what the data had predicted. Denard Robinson—playing in a wildcat formation—fumbled three days in a row. Gabbert, meanwhile, struggled with accuracy, ball security and rhythm. In 11-on-11 drills during the first week of camp, he and the backup quarterbacks went nine consecutive throws without a single completion.

On one series, Gabbert stood tall and relaxed in the pocket, worked through his read progressions and fired a laser to the tight end for a big gain. On the next series, he was slow and awkward setting up in the pocket and got cleated in the shin by his own guard. Gabbert sprained an ankle and had to sit out the next practice. The QB Khan had described in his report before the draft hadn't shown up for more than a play or two during the first week of camp and was competing with journeyman Chad Henne for playing time.

That's the trouble with trying to define truth in the NFL. It changes with every snap. ■



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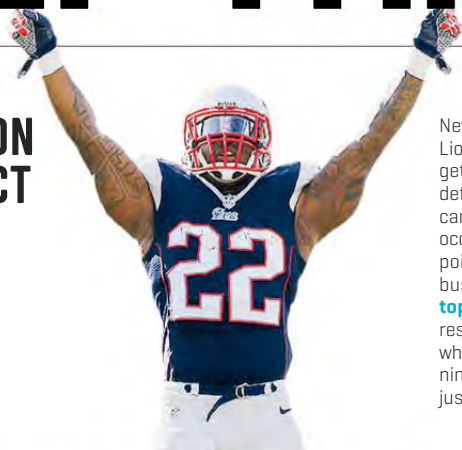
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SWEEP THE LEAGUE!

TIP 1

DRAFT

RBs WHO'LL PREY ON THE PATRIOT EFFECT



New England's rapid-fire offense ran 1,191 plays last season, 31 more than the next team, the Lions. That was second most in NFL history, and the way Tom Brady is talking, the Pats want to get to the line even faster in 2013. So it makes sense that after facing Stevan Ridley (▲) & Co., defenses—especially the big boys up front—will be exhausted after the game, right? Frank Gore can give you that answer. In a strange scheduling quirk last season, Gore and the Niners on four occasions faced a team coming off the Patriots, and Gore feasted on those teams for 16 fantasy points per game [he averaged 10.5 fppg in his other 12 games]. When we tracked data of the busiest offenses in the NFL from each of the previous three seasons, we likewise found that **top rushers put up 1.5 more points against "hungover" opponents** than they did against the rest of their schedule [we found negligible differences for quarterbacks and wide receivers]. So what does this mean for your fantasy team? Well, take a look at the accompanying chart for the nine teams that will benefit the most from a post-Patriots headache in 2013—you might have just found another reason to grab C.J. Spiller or BenJarvus Green-Ellis. —BEN BRADLEY

PATRIOTS VS.



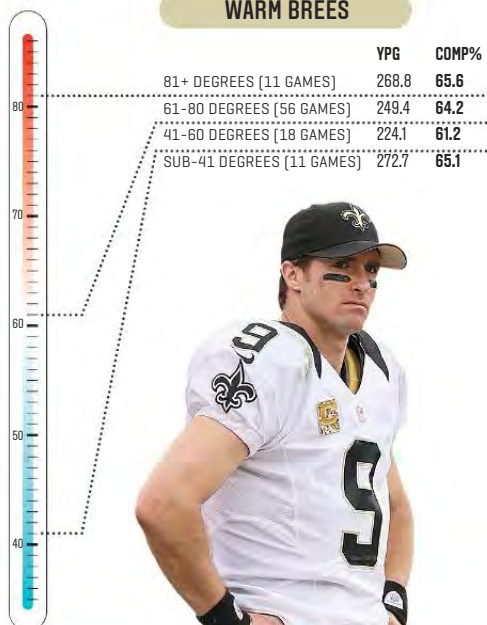
will be playing against ...

TIP 2

AVOID

WATCHING THE WEATHER CHANNEL

WARM BREEZES



There's no doubt that weather can be a factor in NFL games. But for fantasy purposes, **the effects of Mother Nature are largely overrated**. Exhibit A: In his career, Brett Favre threw 33.7 passes per game at a 62% completion rate. In games in which the mercury stayed below 40 degrees, he threw 32.5 times a game at 61.1%. Exhibits B and C: Tom Brady has averaged 247 ypg in games played at under 41 degrees, just six yards lower than his overall norm, while Drew Brees (▲) has thrown for 272.7 ypg in cold-weather contests, which is actually better than his performance in the heat [see chart]. And if you're still not convinced, we present Exhibit D: Peyton Manning and Joe Flacco combined for 621 yards and six TDs in last year's playoff game with the temperature at 13 degrees at kickoff. —AJ MASS

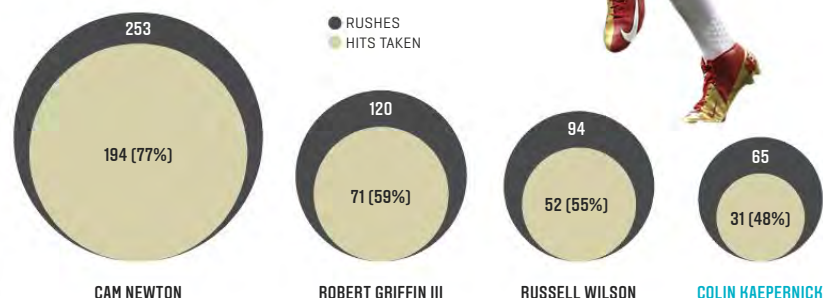
TIP 3

DRAFT

ELUSIVE RUNNING QUARTERBACKS

The newest generation of running QBs may be young, but they aren't stupid. This chart plots out the number of times Robert Griffin III, Russell Wilson and Colin Kaepernick (▶) took a hit last season. Turns out, **they're pretty good at protecting themselves by sliding or getting out of bounds**, at least compared with the guy who blazed a path before them: Cam Newton.

HIT SQUAD





IF THERE'S ONE MOTTO FOR FANTASY FOOTBALL—AND 1980s KARATE MOVIES—IT'S THAT YOU MUST ATTACK WITH NO MERCY. IN FANTASY THAT MEANS DIGGING DEEP AND READING EVERY LAST PAGE OF OUR ESPN FANTASY FOOTBALL GUIDE ◀ (ON NEWSSTANDS NOW, WITH COLIN KAEPERNICK ON THE COVER). BUT IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A SHORTCUT TO GLORY, READ ON—THESE SIX **DRAFT** OR **AVOID** TIPS JUST MIGHT CRANE-KICK YOU TO A LEAGUE TITLE.

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TIP 4

AVOID

POSTSEASON WORKHORSES

They don't call the playoffs an extra season for nothing. Super Bowl teams might see an additional 250 plays on top of their usual 16-game slate, and our research shows that it often takes a toll on their running backs. We looked at the top five RBs in postseason carries over the past 10 seasons, then plotted out how they fared the next season. The results? Of those 50 top carriers, 32 saw their rushing yardage totals decrease the next season. **In fact, the average hardworking playoff RB loses 189.4 rushing yards the season after his playoff run.** So which grinders could be headed for a plummet in 2013? Here's a look at last year's most worked playoff RBs and the fate they'll be running to avoid. —CHRISTOPHER HARRIS

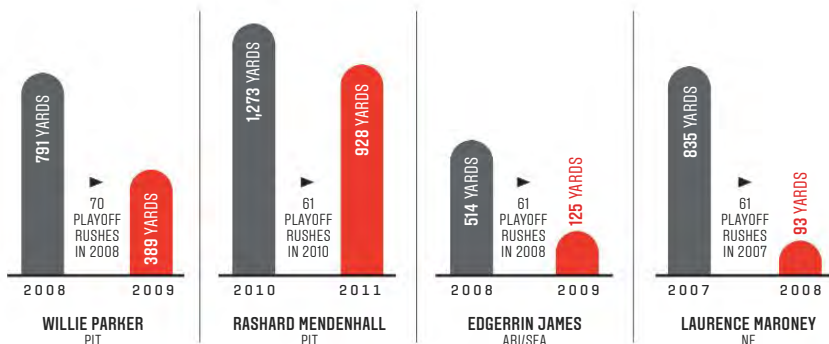


2012 PLAYOFF CARRIES

84	RAY RICE	BAL
63	FRANK GORE	SF
54	ARIAN FOSTER	HOU
39	BERNARD PIERCE	BAL
36	MARSHAWN LYNCH	SEA

GROUND DOWN

Of the seven ball carriers since 2007 to break 60 playoff totes, four had rough follow-up campaigns.



TIP 5

DRAFT

BUTTERFINGERED RECEIVERS (YEP, YOU READ THAT RIGHT)

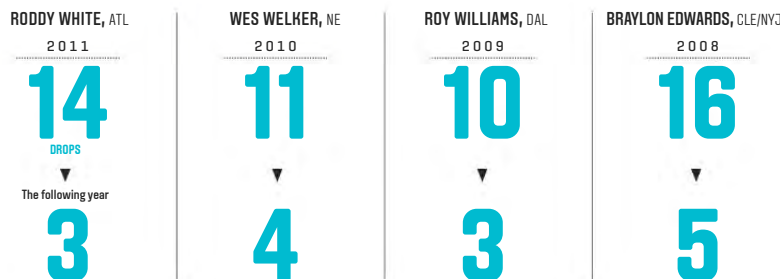
Saints games sure were painful for fantasy owners last season, as Jimmy Graham, Marques Colston and Darren Sproles all finished among the league leaders in dropped passes. So do those three fantasy stalwarts have bad hands, or did a case of the dropsies sweep through the New Orleans locker room? Well, based on recent history, we're blaming the dropsies, not chronic steel-handsitis. Since ESPN started tracking drop data in 2008, **the league's top pass bumblers dropped about half as many passes in the season after being one of the league's 10 worst.** In fact, of those 50 players, 44 saw improvement, by an average of almost five fewer dropped passes. Just last year, most notably, Falcons star Roddy White rebounded from a disastrous 2011 (14 drops) by botching only three Matt Ryan passes. Bottom line: Graham & Co. ought to see major improvement in 2013. —C.H.

2012 DROPS

14	JIMMY GRAHAM, NO
11	WES WELKER, NE
9	JUSTIN BLACKMON, JAC
	DEZ BRYANT, DAL
	MARQUES COLSTON, NO
	VICTOR CRUZ, NYG
	A.J. GREEN, CIN
	BRANDON MARSHALL, CHI
	DARREN SPROLES, NO
8	BRENT CELEH, PHI
	CALVIN JOHNSON, DET
	JULIO JONES, ATL
	BRANDON LLOYD, NE
	DARREN MCFADDEN, OAK
	BRANDON PETTIGREW, DET
	ANDRE ROBERTS, ARI
	CECIL SHORTS III, JAC

STOP DROPS, GET ROLLING

How the league's top pass bobbler from 2008 to 2011 improved the following year.



TIP 6

AVOID

"OLD" RUNNING BACKS

This warning doesn't necessarily relate to the player's actual age. More important than the date on a back's birth certificate is his career carries. In NFL history, **74 players have gotten to 1,500 carries, but only 33 have made it to 2,000.** In recent years, Terrell Davis and Priest Holmes both went from fantasy stalwarts to post-1,500-carry casualties in an instant. This trend matters because a handful of high-profile players are on the cusp of that cliff. On the list of career carry leaders among active backs,

certain players [Willis McGahee, for example] won't be drafted high. But you might be contemplating a heavy investment in several others. As great as Marshawn Lynch played last season, and even though he's just 27 years old, he's about to hit that critical 1,500-carry threshold. And despite his offseason boast that he'll outrush Adrian Peterson this year, Chris Johnson is swimming upstream in the NFL history books. Approach with caution, especially in keeper leagues. —KC JOYNER

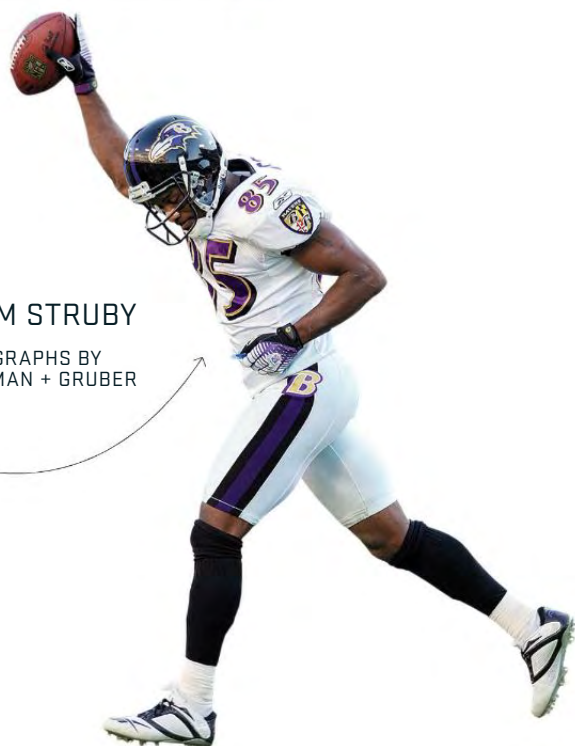
CARRY OVER

Sure, age matters. But miles on the tires might be more important than DOB.



EVERY X DAY IS TUESDAY

FOR **DERRICK MASON**,
HIS NFL RETIREMENT
ISN'T ABOUT BATTLING
CTE OR DEALING WITH
BAD INVESTMENTS.
HE'S JUST A MAN
STRUGGLING TO FILL
HIS DAYS. X



BY TIM STRUBY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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PREVIEW

NFL YESTERDAY
Retired, lost, confused

NFL TODAY
Retired, still lost, still confused





Without the NFL running his life, Mason craves structure. And a way to stay in shape.

6:00 A.M. FRANKLIN, TENN.

Derrick Mason wakes up before it's light out, as he does every morning. Sometimes he feels stiffness in old battle wounds—a reconstructed scapula, a left knee plagued by tendinitis, a right pinkie that doesn't bend. But mostly he considers himself lucky; after 943 receptions, 12,061 yards and 66 touchdowns—15 seasons in the NFL—he's not suffering from anything really serious, like arthritic hips or headaches due to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

He showers, dresses in jeans and a snug Pepsi T-shirt, and 30 minutes later he's in his white Range Rover, off to pick up his kids and deliver them to school. During the week, they live with their mother, Marci, with whom Derrick remains friends. The couple, now divorced, talk a dozen times a day, mostly about daughter Bailee, 13, and 10-year-old Derrick Jr.—what activities are scheduled for the day, who needs to

be where and when. For Mason, who retired in June 2012, his children have become the center of his universe. He takes them to school every morning, picks them up every afternoon, watches every lacrosse practice and every dance recital. On weekends, he feeds them, cleans up after them and chauffeurs them, endlessly, around Nashville, where he was based for eight years while playing for the Oilers-turned-Titans. It's a good thing, though. His last seven seasons he made it home only once a week; Mason lived in Baltimore for six of them, then in New York and Houston his final season. He missed out on school plays and scraped knees, Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas parties. Not anymore. "I've become a part of my kids' lives again; I'm able to be a dad," Mason says. "The cheering's stopped, but I still have the two biggest fans in the world."

Coffee in hand, Mason is back at the house by 8 a.m. Home is a handsome four-bedroom in one of Franklin's upscale developments. It's a nice, modest home, certainly no McMansion. Through the front door, Mason immediately sets about his chores. Ginger, his 8-month-old boxer, has pooped in her crate. After he lets her into the backyard, he puts on yellow rubber gloves, grabs a bottle of Mr. Clean and takes the kennel outside into the crisp October air for a hose-down. Next on his list: two loads of laundry to be sorted and put away.

The No. 12 receiver on the NFL's all-time list doesn't mind being Mr. Mom. It's better than being Mr. Nothing or, worse, Mr. Tragic. The problems facing retired NFL players can be dire: multiple concussions and CTE that lead to depression and, in extreme cases, suicide; or unwise investments, expensive tastes or costly divorces that lead to Chapter 11. Yet many of the struggles most former players face don't make the news. Their issues are far more pedestrian, far more common, like getting a job, finding a calling, being productive. "Retirement has been life-changing," Mason says as he carefully places folded clothes into a laundry basket. "It's frustrating at times because I was so used to doing something. Now it's kind of hard to fill the time."

Mason has his health, he has money—he still has a decent chunk of the nearly \$40 million (before taxes anyway) that he made in the league. He doesn't live extravagantly, yet he still struggles. "Some days are better than others," he says. The bad days occur when Mason doesn't

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Mason is not yet doing radio work full time, so on some days, socks get his attention. Yes, socks.



have much to do. Time slows to a crawl.

The good days are busy days—days like today. Days when there's not a lot of time to reflect on the future. Days when he feels useful.

"Do I miss the NFL?" Mason says. "Sometimes." He misses the camaraderie. Misses being part of something. Misses the anticipation on game day and the rush of running out of the tunnel into a stadium that explodes with cheers. "But I had my share, I had my allotment in life," he says. He pauses, then grabs another handful of clothes from the dryer.

11:45 A.M.

MPOWER FITNESS, FRANKLIN

Beads of sweat glisten on Mason's shaved head as he does standing cable rotations. After a minute's rest and some water, it's on to lat pulls, the incline bench and leg lifts. Under the supervision of trainer Chris Neville, Mason works out silently, intensely.

"In a month or two, he could be in football shape," Neville says.

Not that Mason is out of shape. At 203 pounds, he's only 8 pounds off his playing weight. He's still ripped, powerful and, for once in his life, enjoying the gym. "It's nice not to have to work out because your job requires it," he explains as he towels off. "I also don't have to train for explosiveness and speed. It's just to maintain my joints and stay healthy enough to keep up with Derrick."

Mason spends two mornings a week at MPower; Wednesdays and Saturday mornings he plays pickup basketball at a local high school gym. He also kickboxes three days a week in

**"COMING OUT OF THE
NFL, YOU DON'T HAVE
10 YEARS ON WALL
STREET.
YOU'VE NEVER
WORKED IN
A REAL
INDUSTRY,
SO WHERE DO
YOU GO FROM
HERE?"**

—NATE JONES

addition to the flag football league he joined. The three games he's played in were fun, he says, but a bit weird. "They didn't throw me the ball much," he admits with a laugh. "Guess they figured it wouldn't be fair."

Mason's exercise itinerary isn't totally unusual for a guy into fitness, but in his case it isn't simply about staying in shape. It's about creating structure. Setting a schedule. A need that's common for recent NFL retirees. "Just ask guys around the league. The NFL doesn't foster independence," says Jason Mathews, who played 11 seasons at tackle in the league and now teaches economics and coaches football at Brentwood Academy in Tennessee. "It doesn't teach self-reliance."

Nine months out of the year (and even more during their college years), the daily lives of NFL players are completely mapped out. Meetings and practices and film and meals and travel are all planned to the nth degree. It's so intense that players often equate the rigid structure to the military, or even to prison life. "One of the toughest adjustments is not having a regimented life," Mason says. "Knowing where I had to be every hour of the day, that part I really had to get used to." That's why he wakes up at the same time each day. Buys coffee at the same Starbucks. Goes to the same Mass every Sunday.

"I try to accomplish little things each day," adds Nate Jones, an eight-year NFL vet who's using his finance degree to look for a job on Wall Street. "Have breakfast, work out, maybe visit family. But it's a struggle."

Mason does a final set of iso pushups. Breathing heavily, he wipes his face with a towel. "I thought this year would be difficult," he admits. "I've heard so many guys say so. It gets you kind of scared—doing one thing for the past 20 years and all of a sudden not doing it."

1:30 P.M.

102.5 THE GAME, NASHVILLE, TENN.

Mason sits in a small, soundproof studio painted maroon and black at 102.5 The Game, a local radio station. Beside him is former Titans teammate Brad "B-Hop" Hopkins, current host of the morning show. On this day, Hopkins is filling in on the afternoon show, and he has invited Mason to be a guest.

As Mason tries—and fails—to plug his headphones into his MacBook, B-Hop, in a



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FLYING HIGH UNDER THE RADAR

Don't think Mason should be on the list of all-time greats? Think again. From 2001 to 2010, when the Michigan State product was a starter, he ranked second in the NFL in receptions. He also had an NFL-best eight 1,000-yard seasons.

HINES WARD	830
DERRICK MASON	814
TONY GONZALEZ	808
REGGIE WAYNE	787
TORRY HOLT	786
TERRELL OWENS	759

RECEPTIONS, 2001-10

white and blue patterned shirt and blue-tinted glasses, gives his old pal a little ribbing.

"D-Mase, where's your jack?"

Mason shakes his head. "Aw, man, I don't know about these things."

As the show begins, though, it's evident that Mason does know sports. In addition to Titans football, Mason and B-Hop cover a variety of topics: Lance Armstrong, A-Rod, Predators hockey, the upcoming Auburn-Texas A&M game. The two have a good rapport, Mason's straight man to B-Hop's animated jokester.

"All-time favorite football team?" asks Hopkins.

"Gotta be the Chargers with Air Coryell," replies Mason, referring to legendary coach Don Coryell. "Fouts, J.J., Winslow."

"Favorite music?"

"Motown. Temptations."

Mason is making peanuts for his appearance, but he's happy to be there. After retiring, he wanted to become the next Mike Golic or Cris Collinsworth. His first weekly radio gig was in Nashville. Since then, he has done radio in Baltimore and TV spots on the NFL Network, and these days he's a regular on *The Game*, filling the airwaves every Sunday night, and Monday mornings during the season. "We love D-Mase," gushes station manager Jeff Kolb. "He's a straight shooter. Doesn't pull punches."

Mason can take these smaller jobs, can afford to develop his career locally. He isn't in the broadcast booth for the money. "I could have to work eventually," he says. "But thankfully it's not urgent."

So he doesn't need to work. But he *needs* to work. Because at 38, he's old enough to retire from the NFL but far too young to retire from life. Finding a post-NFL gig, though, can be difficult. "Coming out of the NFL, you don't have 10 years on Wall Street or medical school," Jones says. "You've never worked in a real

industry, so where do you go from here?"

Many, apparently, don't go anywhere. Talk to former players—guys who logged five, seven, 10 years in the league—about their careers after the NFL, and many pursued what they knew best: sports. According to Troy Vincent, NFL senior vice president of player engagement, close to 300 former players are coaching high school football. A few others are lucky enough to land in broadcasting—most before they even take their last snap. But countless others have no clue as to their next move. "After leaving the NFL, I felt Munsoned," says former Titans lineman Zach Piller, referring to *Kingpin* character Roy Munson, who went from bowling prodigy to lost pilgrim. Piller, an eight-year veteran who hasn't played since 2006, dabbled in medical equipment sales, barbecue catering and vending machine distribution before "settling" into driving a cart at the Nashville airport, shuttling people between the terminal and the rental car lots for \$2.35 an hour, plus tips. It's a far cry from the \$4 million signing bonus Piller scored in '03, but he thinks it's better than the alternative: sitting around doing nothing. After all, filling time is filling time. "Guys like Ray Lewis will slide right into a gig after the NFL," Piller says. "But they're the lucky 5%. What about the other 95%?"

Thing is, that other 95% most likely hasn't prepared for a career after football. The overwhelming consensus in the "Not For Long" league is that if you're thinking about your next job, you're somehow jeopardizing your current one. "In order to have success in the NFL, you can't let retirement enter your mind," says former 49ers lineman Eric Heitmann. "You're not gonna play as long or be as good if you think like that."

The NFL is aware of the problem. In 2007 the league sponsored its first "Broadcast Boot Camp"—a three-and-a-half-day workshop that

introduced 20 current and former players to the sports broadcast industry. Since then, the NFL Player Engagement Program has increased its offerings to include 10 seminars on things like music, franchising, Hollywood, and a hospitality and culinary management workshop. "The real adjustment isn't about money, it's psychic and social," Vincent explains.

"Financially, I'd planned," agrees ex-Packers linebacker George E. Koonce Jr., who recently finished writing a book on players' transition to real life. "But when I was playing, I put all of my time and energy into being one of the 1,800 players in the league, not thinking about my next job. So when my NFL career ended, I didn't have a career to transition to. After two years, I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to do."

After a couple of hours of radio banter, Mason removes his headphones. Hopkins and producer Austin Huff are all smiles. They thank the two-time Pro Bowl receiver for coming in. But as Mason heads to the parking lot, he explains that a couple of hours a week isn't fine, it's frustrating. "I know I could be full time on ESPN or the NFL Network," he says. "But everything happens for a reason. I'm trying to do more local news shows and time on *The Game*. Like B-Hop says, you gotta put in the hours. Put in the reps. Just like in sports."

3:00 P.M.

SWIFTWICK OFFICES, BRENTWOOD, TENN.

Looking to kill some time, Mason decides to go look at socks. Tens of thousands of socks, actually. Ankle-high, calf-high, knee-high. Stripes and solids. Some with logos like Papa John's, RadioShack, Superman.

In 2008, on the advice of his money manager, Mason invested in Swiftwick, a Tennessee-based



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company that produces high-quality compression performance socks. Now about twice a month, he drops by the unassuming Swiftwick headquarters, tucked between a Staples and a tiny post office branch. The front of the offices consists of 10 cubicles, none of which belongs to Mason, and a meeting room. The back holds a warehouse and distribution center. As he roams the premises, the employees greet him with warm smiles. Mason is a friendly guy—a genuine, humble guy who, while somewhat reserved, radiates an attractive warmth. He was, according to Piller, the perfect teammate. “One of the most competitive guys on the field,” he says. “And one of the nicest gentlemen off.”

Swiftwick has been a good investment, Mason says. He likes being a part of the operations, albeit marginally, and he loves the socks themselves. Wears them all the time. But this is a man who played in a Super Bowl (1999), holds the Ravens’ career receiving record (5,777 yards) and is the only player in NFL history with at least 10,000 receiving yards and 5,000 return yards. It’s not a stretch to say that socks don’t excite Mason. They don’t inspire him. “I need to find something that makes me happy,” he says. “Something I enjoy getting up and doing.”

For many, including Mason, that’s easier said than done. “It’s hard trying to find the same drive I had as a player,” Heitmann says. “Every athlete, even first-round picks, has a chip on his shoulder. He needs to prove himself. Now I need to find something to get that chip on my shoulder back, to harness that energy, that fire.”

“The trick is to find a new purpose, a new mission,” Koonce says. After his nine-year NFL career ended in 2000, Koonce found himself adrift, depressed, lost. Eventually he mustered the courage to go back to school, at Marquette University, and in 2012 submitted his Ph.D. dissertation. Its focus? The struggles of former players transitioning to life after the NFL. “Guys need to identify others who can help. A new team with a new game plan. That way they can rekindle the passion they once had for football.”



Mason catches up with Titans receiver Kenny Britt, who will have a tough time catching up to Mason’s success in Nashville—four 1,000-plus-yard seasons.

7:50 P.M.

ENSWORTH SCHOOL, DEVON FARM CAMPUS, NASHVILLE

It’s a chilly fall night, and Mason is back on a football field in uniform. Not helmet and pads, but orange sneakers, black slacks and a black-and-white polo emblazoned with an orange “E.”

Last August he became Coach Mason, the Ensworth Tigers’ wide receivers coach. The hours are 3 to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday, with Friday night games that include two preseason, eight regular-season and, if all goes according to plan, three playoff games en route to the Tigers’ third consecutive state title. Tonight’s clash with Mathews’ Brentwood Academy team is their biggest so far this season. Not only is it being televised nationally on ESPNU, but the Tigers, at 8–0, need a convincing win to retain their No. 18 national ranking.

Mason enjoys coaching: teaching young men how to get separation, to avoid straightening up at the top of a route, to do it like a pro. He also likes being around the game without being in the game. But he never wanted to be known as Coach. The Michigan State standout, who majored in communications, initially resisted coach Ricky Bowers’ offer. “I didn’t want to

commit,” he recalls. “Because what if radio or broadcasting work comes up?” But the phone never rang. As winter turned to spring, Mason reconsidered. Not for the money. He simply needed to get out of the house.

It was an unexpected turn, but these are strange days for Mason. Days like the one a few weeks earlier, Week 1 of the NFL season, when the Titans hosted the Patriots. After a guest radio spot with B-Hop, Mason took a surreal stroll through the LP Field parking lot an hour before kickoff. “I’d never walked into a stadium before,” he says. “Never seen tailgating in person.”

Mason roams the Ensworth sideline, headset on. He rides the ref when a Tigers receiver is called for a holding penalty. But he does little else. No playcalling, little interaction with his wideouts. It’s not his fault; the Tigers have arguably the best running back in Tennessee, and when the final whistle blows, sealing the home team’s 20–0 win, the Tigers’ aerial attack totals 4-for-7 for 12 yards. “I’m excited for these boys,” he says. “Not so much for me.”

Mason shakes hands with fellow coaches, congratulates some players and heads to the stands to look for Bailee. En route, he stops to chat with a parent he knows from his daughter’s class and graciously poses for a few photos. But Mason seems restless. Not completely comfortable in this pedestrian world. In his new life.

He finds Bailee beside the grandstands, decked out in sequined Uggs and a gray sweatshirt. As he puts his arm around her shoulders and they head for the exit, she looks up at her father and laughs warmly. “It’s weird having you around all the time,” she says.

Mason doesn’t say anything, just keeps walking, nodding in agreement. ■

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[YOU CAN'T HELP WHO YOU LOVE] *Jay Cutler is one of the most disliked athletes in America. But America has it all wrong. How do I love the Bears QB? Let me count the ways.*



I love Jay Cutler. I don't mean love the way teenage girls mean it, "luv" in big bubble letters, baby-faced idol love. My love is singular, and it will never be outgrown. I don't mean love the way a craftsman might admire a perfect object. My love is not so mathematical. I don't mean love the way the hunter loves the lion or the sailor loves the sea. My love is fearless. I don't even mean love the way I love my children, because my children sometimes make it hard to love them, but I always love Jay Cutler.

I'm being serious. Maybe you can't understand my love, or believe in it, but that doesn't make it any less real. Looking back, I can't remember the moment I fell for him, because it wasn't instantaneous, some crush doomed to fizzle. My love was built slowly but to last, like a railway. I know it didn't begin when he was at Vanderbilt, because who gives a crap about Vanderbilt? It must have started when he was in Denver. But even then my love was not complete, perhaps because he was all promise, and true love, enduring love, is what comes after the promise of it. Love isn't love until it can survive routine, Sunday after crushing Sunday.

No, our love—I sometimes say "our" instead of "my," because I believe Jay Cutler would love me back, if only he answered my letters and accepted my calls—was born in Chicago, where he always belonged. I will confess that my love is partly aesthetic: He was made to wear a Bears uniform, or it was made for him. Cutler and Chicago are a perfect confluence of man and city, two weary second-placers somehow still flush with the hope that this year they will be first.

I would guess my love became full on just such a bittersweet day, in November 2011, when he was often brilliant against the Chargers, but he also broke his thumb. In his postgame news conference, Cutler sat behind the microphone, wearing a white cardigan that would have made a laughingstock of a less confident man, his hair magnificent as usual, and he was asked about a touchdown pass he'd threaded to tight end Kellen Davis. "It's a window," he said with his dreamy smirk. "I know I'm going to fit it in there. I've never questioned it and I never will."

Therein lies the truth of our love: We're both blind to anything that might threaten it. Cutler can't see the men who will intercept him, because he refuses to accept that such men might exist. His arm is too good for nongods to stop him. And my own love won't let me see those same impossible interceptions, even when there are four or five of them in a single game and the score indicates that they must have taken place. My mind turns them into completed passes thrown to players who put on the wrong shirts.

Whenever Cutler does or says something that maddens others, I find only buttresses for my affection. When he shoved left tackle J'Marcus Webb during a game last September, I saw a passionate man on his way to being sacked seven times. (When Peyton Manning glowers, it's called leadership; when Jay Cutler does, it's petulance.) I am likewise deaf to the accusations of Cutler's softness. Yes, he left midway through the 2010 NFC championship game with a knee sprain, but the following season he survived a brutal tackle by Ndamukong Suh, who buried him into the ground. Cutler could not have been blamed for being dead, never mind on the sideline. Instead, he played on.

And yet some people still look at him and see apathy; they Photoshop cigarettes between his fingers and smoke coming out of his mouth. Maybe that's the real reason I reserve so much of my love for Jay Cutler: He can seem so selective with his. It's a mistake to think he doesn't care about anything. I believe he cares so deeply about only a few things that his soul doesn't have room for anything else. He loves football, throwing footballs in particular, and he apparently loves some tiny blond woman from TV and their baby boy. That nothing else catches hold in him—including what any of us think—is his gift, not his curse. We should all be so lucky to have such single-minded hearts.

Why do I love Jay Cutler? Because he has taught me that it's not who or what we love that matters. It matters only that we do love, and that we are certain in it. ■

VALENTIN NARCISSE

DAUGHTER MAITLAND



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